THE BETTER MAN, a fast-moving novelet, by Barry Cord

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TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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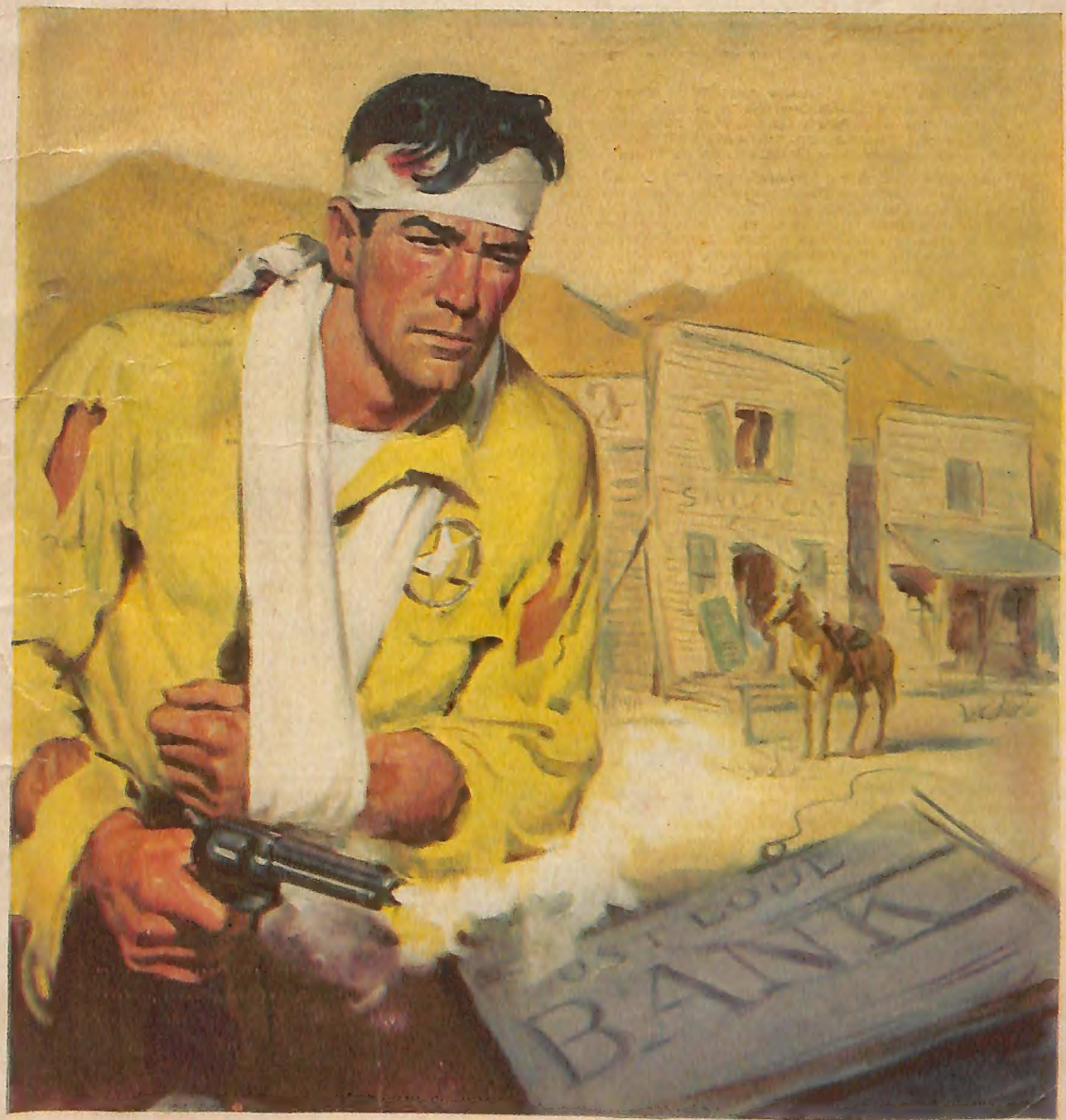

FEATURING: **GHOST-TOWN GUNSMOKE** By JACKSON COLE

On the trail of a vengeful ex-con, a kill behind, rode Hatfield

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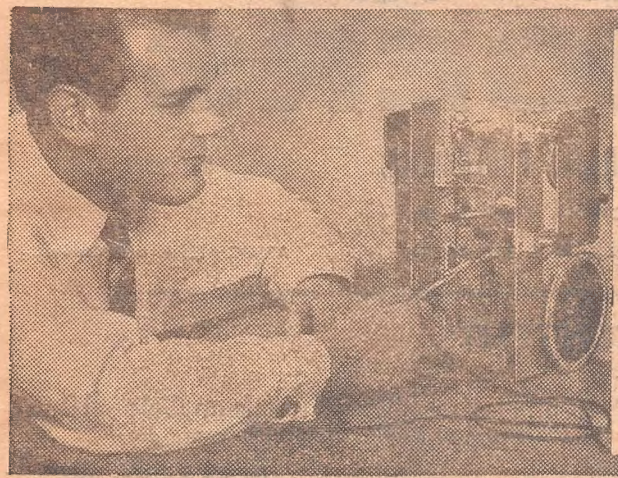

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TEXAS RANGERS

VOL. 68, NO. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION NOVEMBER, 1957

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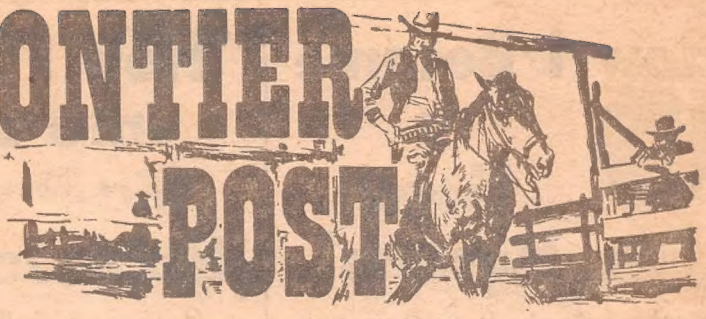

By CAPTAIN STARR

Town of Heroes

CHANCES are you never heard of Tom French, a postmaster, and John Allen, the proprietor of a hardware store, but they are among the true unsung heroes of the West. They, perhaps more than anybody else, helped ring down the curtain on the Younger brothers and the James boys, as notorious a bunch of outlaws as ever roamed the Plains.

It all happened at Northfield, Minnesota on a fallish day when the three Younger brothers and Frank and Jesse James came to that small frontier town. They also had some other hard-cases with them—Bill Stiles, Clel Miller and three or four others.

The sleepy little town had no idea that its most memorable day was unfolding. The Younger-James gang were strangers to the community, and they came singly or in pairs, so as not to attract attention.

When the gang of outlaws finally struck, it seemed like a cinch to them that they could take the Northfield bank without trouble. A bunch of them simply strode inside, while another group stayed outside to see that they got no interference.

But they did not count on the brave reflex action of the townspeople.

First of all, there was John Allen, the hardware merchant. He was entering the bank when the robbery burst into the open. Desperado Clel Miller, guarding the entrance, drew a gun on him. Allen spun around and started running down the street, shouting as he ran, arousing the community to what was happening. Young Henry Wheeler, whose father ran another store, sprang to his feet and also began shouting, "Robbery! Bank Robbery!"

Clel Miller, Cole Younger and three more of the "outside" bandits began shooting at anything that moved. Nick Gustavson, a Swedish immigrant, ran out to see what was happening, and was killed.

If the bandits thought this would serve as an object lesson, they just didn't know the town of Northfield, Minnesota. Seeing what was happening, Postmaster French began looking for a gun and when he didn't find one, ran out and commenced heaving rocks at the bandits, an incredible bit of heroism. Others followed.

Meanwhile, the employees inside the bank were being just as stubborn. They declined to open the vault for the bandits, despite their drawn guns, claiming untruthfully that the vault had a time lock.

While all this was happening, Allen, the hardware man, had raced to his store, grabbed up an armful of guns and ammunition and was passing them out to everyone in sight—and all began shooting at the outlaws. Alarmed by this, the desperadoes decided to flee empty-handed.

The whole escapade lasted only seven minutes, but in that short space of time the backbone of the Younger-James gang was broken. Cole Younger was seriously wounded and Bill Stiles and Clel Miller were killed. The other bandits managed to escape into the woods, but an aroused posse of farmers and townsmen went in after them and a few days later another bandit, Charlie Pitts, and two more of the Younger brothers were badly wounded.

Yep, Northfield had some brave ones.

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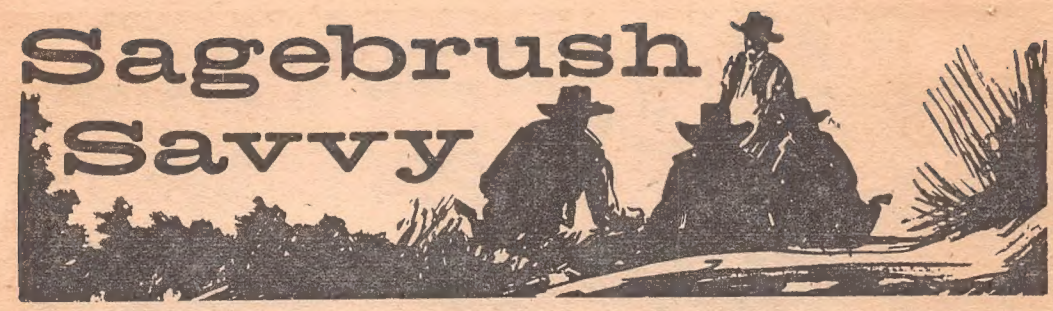

A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—Please give me some information regarding the location of ghost towns in the United States, especially those not now inhabited.—W.H. (Wash.)

A.—Space available here will not allow me to describe exact locations, but I will list a few of the hundreds of ghost towns in the West by states. Road maps will show you how to reach some of them. I suggest that you write to State Tourist Bureaus at the capitals of the states in whose ghost towns you are specially interested. In Washington —Ruby, Loop-Loop, Fidalgo City. In Oregon—Malheur City, Althouse, Kerbyville, Sailors' Diggings, French Flat, Browntown, Allentown. In Idaho—Leesburg, Dewey, Moose City, Silver City. In California—Bodie, Carson Hill, Skidoo, Hornitos, Enterprise. In Nevada—Aurora, Candelaria, Goldfield, Midas, Dun Glen, Treasure City, Broken Hills, DeLamar. In Utah—Harrisburg, Alta, Gold Hill, Iron City. In Colorado —Oro City, Sunshine, Elkton, Tarryall, Buckskin, Joe, Cripple Creek. In Wyoming —South Pass City. In Montana—Diamond City, Bannack, Elkhorn, Virginia City. In Arizona—White Hills, Jerome, Turkey Creek, Blue Bell, Crown King, Tip Top, Charleston, Gold Road. In New Mexico—Shakespeare, Bland, Chloride, Elizabethtown, Georgetown, Kingston, White Oaks.

Q.—(1) A friend says the Lone Ranger and Tonto of radio and TV really lived. I say not. Which is right? (2) Is *Masked Rider Western* still published and by what company? (3) Where can I buy by mail a good Western hat? (4) Does the F. A. Bartlett Tree Expert Co. have tree climbers in any Western states? (5) Why don't the authors write a story having the Masked Rider, Jim Hatfield and Capt. Bob Pryor in a case together?—A. R. (Va.)

A.—(1) You are right. Similar people lived in the old West, but not these exact characters. (2) No, but it may sometime be revived by Standard Magazines. (3) Write for catalogues to Miller Stockman Supply Co., 1555 Lawrence St., Denver 17, Colo. or Denver Dry Goods Co., Denver, Colo. (4) You've got me on this one, but I'll try to find out. (5) The editor of TR tells me that you've got to give the outlaws at least a fighting chance to have a good story, and what chance would they have against those three?

Q.—Was the word "Apache," as the name of an Indian tribe, taken from the French word "apache," meaning a Parisian thug or gangster?—R.S.S. (Mo.)

A.—If there is any connection between the two words, it would have to be the other way around, since the tribal name "Apache" comes from the Zuni Indian word "apachu," meaning "enemy." The Indian "Apache" is pronounced Ah-PAH-chay or Uh-PATCH-ee, the French "apache" is pronounced Ah-PAHSH.

Further answer to an earlier question about what Indians call their cradle boards for carrying papooses: The Sioux call their cradle board a "baby bonnet" in English, a *po-stan* in Sioux language. An oldtimer tells me they sometimes used to call them "papoose packs."

—S. Omar Barker

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FOR every word that has left the lips of bishops or statesmen to enlighten man, a thousand have been withheld. For every book publicly exposed to the inquiring mind, one hundred more have been suppressed—*damned to oblivion*. Each year of progress has been wilfully delayed centuries. Wisdom has had to filter through biased, secret sessions or ecclesiastical council meetings, where high dignitaries of state and church alone proclaimed what man should know.

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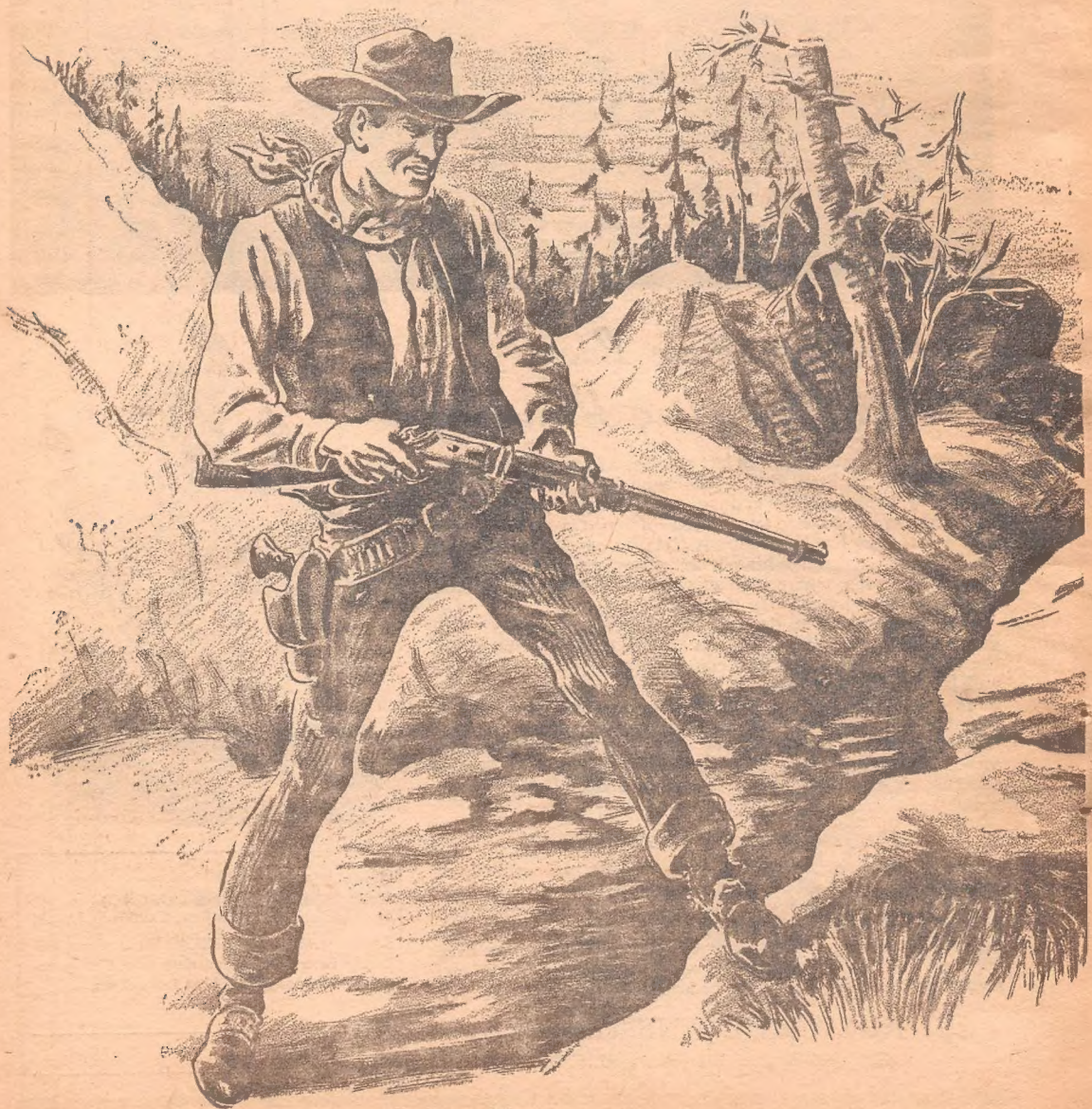
A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE



GUNSMOKE

The Lone Wolf had to guess where the ex-convict with a venegeance list planned to strike next—and if he guessed wrong, more men would die

I

Bank Robber's Loot

HAWK-FACED, wolf-lean, Blaze Bartell made a predatory figure as he stepped down from the vestibule of the daycoach when the train halted at Massacre Wells to take on water.

The accumulated hatred and bitterness of the long prison years showed in Bartell's eyes as he surveyed the drab Texas scene, so exactly like it had been twenty years ago. He was a man made fanatical by his thirst for revenge.

Bartell carried no gun, no baggage. His denim jumper, his waist levis and boots and Stetson—these were conspicuously new. But the man himself looked old, older by half again his forty-two years. Long-festering hate could do that to a man.

The train pulled out in a rush of steam and smoke and the stench of hot oil. He

It took effort for Hatfield not to put a slug in the man at his feet

watched it dwindle into the glassy heat-haze, westward toward El Paso. He was alone in the immensity of the Texas desert, a desert accented on the north by the lilac-shadowed lifts of Guadalupe Peak, and on the flats below by the cluster of abondoned shacks built long ago around the waterhole named Massacre Wells, because the Comanches had wiped out a wagon train here in '49.

Nothing had changed. The railroad hadn't painted its tank. The sagebrush speckled the tawny sandhills yonder, as it had done on that bleak day, two decades past, when he had crossed that malpais out there, steering for the watertank and the cottonwood bosque around the seep which were the only landmarks to relieve the monotony of the west Texas badlands. A fugitive, and wounded.

His hair had been flaming red then, as red as the stains on the makeshift bandage he had stuffed into the gunshot wound in his side; he had gotten his nickname of "Blaze" from that red hair. Now, under the stiff new Stetson, the hair was white, thinly sprinkled with sorrel, and the top of his head was as bald as if a Comanche had worked him over with a scalping knife.

He had come here to kill a man, providing the rumors he had picked up in San Antone a week ago were true. He'd heard that old Griz Hockaday, ex-sheriff of Rio Grande county had come to Massacre Wells to live out his sunset years in solitude.

Bartell made his way over to the tank tender's shanty. The tender was young, and dark as a Mexican from the sun and wind. About twenty, Bartell guessed. He was reminded that that was about the age he had been when Sheriff Griz Hockaday had tracked him down and slapped the handcuffs on him, right here at Massacre Wells, after a manhunt that had zig-zagged over the map of west Texas for three weeks.

The tank tender appeared startled to see a stranger; he grinned sympathetically as he jumped to a conclusion.

"Did you step off the Flyer to stretch your joints, stranger, and the train took off without you?"

Bartell shook his head. His yellow-flecked, lupine eyes were studying the tank tender quizzically.

"I stepped off the train to visit an old friend," he said. After twenty years behind the high gray walls at San Castro Prison it was next to impossible to keep that secretive, cellblock timbre out of it. "Say, you look familiar. You feel the same way about me?"

It was possible, Blaze Bartell knew, that this young man could have served time at San Castro, that they had met on the prison compound. The tank tender stared at him, then shook his head.

"Can't say as I do, stranger. My name's Hockaday, Larry Hockaday. I work for the El Paso & Southern, tank tender and section boss."

Bartell ran a hand along his stubbled jaw. "You're Griz Hockaday's kid, then. I was wonderin' why the sheriff picked this Godforsaken spot to settle after he turned in his star."

Larry Hockaday grinned. "You know my Dad?"

"Did, years ago, when I packed a star myself. My name is—" Bartell hesitated —"Kelso, Mick Kelso."

Mick Kelso was the warden at San Castro; it was the first name that entered his mind.

"Pleased to meet an old amigo of my Dad's, Mr. Kelso," young Hockaday said over their handshake. He turned and pointed off down the sage-mottled slope toward the shacks which edged the waterhole. "See the house with the fieldstone chimney, at the far side of the graveyard where they buried the victims of the old Indian massacre? That's where Dad's living, batchin' with me."

Bartell felt his heart slug his ribs. The rumors he had dug up in San Antone had been true, then. The first victim on his vengeance trail was ready to be scratched off the list.

"I understand another train's due through here, east-bound, later this morning," Bartell said.

Young Hockaday consulted his pocket watch. "San Antonio Flyer stops for water at eleven-forty, and she's prompt. If you're aimin' to have a visit with Dad, that'll give you a good couple hours."

Bartell thanked the kid and headed down the slope toward the town. Since no one else had left the El Paso train when he did, he knew the law hadn't put a detective on his trail. That came as a mild surprise; he had expected to be shadowed closely for the first two weeks, at least, after he had served his time at San Castro. After all, he was the only person living who knew what had become of the $50,000 loot from the Lost Lode bank. The other bandidos who had taken part in that robbery hadn't lived very long, and the loot hadn't been on Blaze Bartel when Sheriff Hockaday had finally caught up with him, here at Massacre Wells.

During his trial, in the Lost Lode courthouse, it had been pointed out that Bartell, seriously wounded, could have been delirious, out of his mind during most of his flight. Massacre Wells was a good hundred miles from Lost Lode; Bartell could have dropped the saddlebag packed with the $50,000 in gold specie at any point along that desert route, without being aware of it.

HEADING down the slope, Bartell made a circuit of the town's weatherbeaten shacks. Time enough to drop in on old Sheriff Hockaday after he had paid a little visit up the dry wash which made its eroded gash in the hills north of the oasis.

A hundred yards inside the gulch, out of sight of the railroad tank and the shanties circling the waterhole, and Blaze Bartell might have been in a burned-out crater of the moon. No vegetation grew in this shale-walled defile. It was exactly as his memory had pictured it during the long, long years at Castro pen.

It took him a half an hour to work his way up the nameless gully until he came in sight of the red sandstone needle jutting up from the west rim. Time could change the contours of a gulch, what with earthslides, flash floods, scouring winds, falling trees. But that spindle of eroded pink rock had endured for milleniums of time and that was why Blaze Bartell had selected it to mark the site of his cache, that long-ago day.

He scrambled up the talus slope to the

JIM HATFIELD

base of the pinnacle and moved around toward the north side until he saw the flat slab rock, big as a table top, which rested on a protruding stone shelf which formed the base of the pinnacle.

"Nothing's changed," the old ex-convict muttered aloud. "I doubt whether a human eye has seen this slab since I put it here." A frenzied excitement put its tremor in his voice now.

Twenty years ago, weakened from loss of blood, it had been a chore moving that slab into position. Today, his muscles hardened and toned by two decades on the rockpiles and road gangs, Blaze Bartell edged it to one side with comparative ease.

A vast sense of exhultation flowed through the tawny old lobo as he saw the tooled-leather saddlebags packed neatly in the eroded pothole hollow which the slab had covered. In this dry climate the leather had stiffened, but it hadn't rotted. And the gold inside those *alforjas* might be corroded, but it wouldn't have rusted, or decayed like paper money would have done.

He pulled the saddle pouches out of the hole, hefting their weight. He thought, a man can live a long time down in Mexico, with this much *oro Americano*. And they thought I was out of my head and played out when the sheriff dabbed his loop on me . . .

All these years, the famous lost loot of the Lost Lode bank had been waiting for him here at the foot of this sandstone spike. That knowledge was the only thing that had kept Blaze Bartell's sanity on the track, during those prison years.

Under the saddlebags, in the base of the pothole, was his Colt .45 sixgun wrapped in a greasy gunnysack. Blaze Bartell unwound the burlap now and had his look at the revolver. Not a fleck of rust on the barrel; hammer and trigger and cylinder moved as smoothly as in his heyday as a gunman.

His foresight, twenty years before when capture loomed imminent, stood him in good stead today, for it would have been difficult to have obtained a sixgun when he was broke and friendless.

Bartell ejected the five cartridges from the cylinder of the weapon and replaced them with fresh ammunition he had purchased in San Antonio. No use taking chances with a misfire when he faced Griz Hockaday this morning.

Shouldering the heavy bags of specie, Bartel headed back down the arroyo toward the old sheriff's house at the edge of the Massacre Wells cemetery. There would be a new grave in that boothill tomorrow, the first of four new graves Bartell intended to see dug in Texas before his vengeance had been sated.

II

Out of the Past

BARTELL recognized old Griz Hockaday as he approached the sheriff's home. The old lawman was sitting in a rocking chair under the wattled *ramada*, pleating a horsehair bridle. His formidable dragoon mustache was snow white, not the coal black Hockaday remembered. He was withered, senile, deformed with arthritis. And he wasn't toting a gun, as in those other days.

At the sound of Bartell's cowboots crunching up the cinder path, Griz Hockaday lifted his head and paused in his braiding.

"That you, Hatfield?" the old man called in a shaky, reed-thin voice. "Didn't expect you till the cool of the day."

Bartell shifted the weight of the leather pouches slung across his shoulder, halting not a dozen paces from the edge of the ramada. Griz Hockaday's wasted, bony face was turned into the wind like a wolf scenting trouble, but his eyes were like frosted marbles in the depths of their sockets and they shifted past Bartell without focussing on him.

"I'm an old friend, sheriff," Bartell said. "It's been a good many years since you saw me, but look again, and think hard. I ain't changed that much."

Very slowly, Griz Hockaday set aside his hanks of white and red and black horsehair, and laid his deformed hands on his thighs. Why, the thought ran through Bartell's head, he's crippled up, that's why he ain't wearing a gun any more. The hands that could out-draw any gunslinger in Texas reduced to weavin' horse hair ropes now.

Griz Hockaday said, "I'm blind, friend, and I been that way ever since I got clipped by a stray slug ten years ago down in Frontera. That's why I turned in my

badge an' come up here to roost with my son Larry."

A vast, unreasoning anger flowed through Blaze Bartell. Fate had dealt him a cruel blow, robbing this old sheriff of his eyesight. For twenty years, Blaze Bartell had looked forward to the moment when he would stand before his old enemy and watch the terror come with the recognition in his eyes.

Getting no answer from his visitor, the blind man went on, "You say you're an old friend, but your voice has hate in it, hombre. A blind man can tell. What's your name?"

Ignoring the question Bartell said curiously, "As I was walkin' up just now, you called me Hatfield. Would you have been meaning Jim Hatfield, the one they call the Lone Wolf Ranger?"

Griz Hockaday's thorny brows arched. "Yes. He's payin' me a visit today. Are you acquainted with the big fellow, too?"

Bartell moved closer to the rocker. He said sneeringly, "Not personally acquainted, no. I been out of circulation at San Castro since before Jim Hatfield pinned on a law badge. But I've known plenty of convicts there who got caught by Hatfield."

Hockaday showed his first signs of tension now, in the way he began fingering a bone needle he had been using to separate strands of horsehair in the headstall he had been working on.

"I get it," he said grimly. "You're one of the *malo hombres* I sent to the rockpile, ain't you? That's why your voice sounds familiar, but too far back in time for me to place it. Who in hell are you?"

Blaze Bartell chuckled. "I'll give you a clue, Griz. Listen close now. They say when a man loses his eyesight, his hearin' gets keener. What does this sound like?"

While he was speaking, Bartell had unbuckled the flap of one of his saddlebags. He reached in a work-calloused hand and filled it with corroded gold coins, eagles and double eagles, and let the disks dribble back into the bag with a musical tinkling sound that only gold could make. He saw Hockaday go tense.

"Dinero," Hockaday said. "You're toting specie."

Bartell cinched up the saddlebag straps. "Fifty thousand pesos, sheriff. Loot from the Miner's Bank of Lost Lode, Texas." In the distance beyond Griz Hockaday, past the waterhole, he saw a feather of smoke on the horizon to westward. The San Antonio Flyer was in sight, and Blaze Bartell knew he had to be on it when it pulled out of Massacre Wells. He had perhaps ten minutes left to needle this old man and then blast him to hell.

His leering voice went on. "Place me now, sheriff?"

Griz Hockaday's warped chest swelled to a deep, slow intake of breath. He held that breath for the interval it took his razor-sharp mind to grope back through time to come up with a name.

"Blaze Bartell." He spoke it like a curse. "So you've broke jail."

BARTELL hunkered down beside a *ramada* post, drinking in the dismayed look on Hockaday's face. The old man was resigned to dying. It was written on the taut fixture of his lips, in the way his scrawny shoulders sagged, the way he seemed to be shriveling up.

"No, sheriff. I didn't go over the wall. Prisoners don't escape from San Castro. No I served my time to the last damned dragging minute. I had no influence on the outside to get me a parole."

Hockaday's lips pressed together under the ragged mustaches.

"And you cached your loot somewhere around Massacre Wells, the day I dabbed my loop on you, eh? And you've come back to rub my nose in it before you finish me off."

A harsh laugh grated from the outlaw.

"You ain't the only one I aim to finish off, sheriff. I got me four men to kill. Judge Hix is next. Remember him, the hanging judge, the one who sent me to the rockpile? And then there was the foreman of the jury, Jack Overmire his name was. And number four on the list is the banker who identified me as the masked hombre who held him up, Barry

Wickburg. You knew 'em all in the old days, Sheriff. They'll be showin' up in hell to join you, before too long. And when that little chore is cleaned up, I'll slip across the Rio Grande where Lone Star law can't catch up with me, sheriff, and get myself a señorita and maybe a little ranch, and take life easy for the next thirty-forty years."

Sweat beads were breaking out on Griz Hockaday's skull-like face, the only outward indication of the tension he was trying not to show his craven tormenter.

"You got me ear-marked for hell, maybe," the sheriff said, "but not the others. You won't find any of those other three at Lost Lode, Bartell. That town no longer exists. It was on the way out when you robbed the Miner's Bank & Trust. That was the last straw, I guess, the bank failure."

The whistle of a locomotive reminded Blaze Bartell that time was running out on him. He was tempted to stop over until tomorrow and flag down a train—for an overnight delay here in Massacre Wells would mean bushwacking Hockaday's son—but he decided against it. Hockaday had mentioned that Texas Ranger Jim Hatfield was expected for a visit today. Tangling with a Ranger—especially the legendary Lone Wolf, of whom he had heard so much while in prison—was the last thing Bartell wanted.

"You're lying to me, sheriff," Bartell sneered. "Tryin' to keep me from looking up the others. Well, Lost Lode may be a ghost town, like you say, but at least two on my wanted list are still there. Judge Hix they tell me he's retired an' gone back to Lost Lode to graze. And the banker, Barry Wickburg, I've found out that he's still living in his rooms above the bank, ekein' out his years on a war pension."

Hockaday seemed to crumple. He remained mute.

"And Overmire, the jury foreman who done his damndest to have me hung, he's ranching over San Saba way, I hear. He won't be hard to look up." An insane laugh blew from the outlaw's lips. "What I'm looking forward to the most, though, is walkin' into the old Miners' Bank in Lost Lode and telling Barry Wickburg that I got fifty thousand in gold to deposit. Then I'll give him my name. When it comes to him who I am, and where I got that gold, that's when I'll gut-shoot him. Like I'm gut-shootin' you, Griz."

Hockaday came to his feet, his joints creaking.

"I'll take your slug standing up, Bartell," the old man said quietly. "It may take me an hour or so to die, but I ain't sure I'll be up to talking then. So I'll speak my piece now."

"Speak away, sheriff. I'm listening." The gun in Bartell's hand made its sinister double click as it came to full cock.

"I don't aim to beg for mercy. I've lived seventy-eight years and I'm nothing but a damned burden on my son. What I want to tell you is this, Bartell. When you face Barry Wickburg in the Miner's Bank, with that stolen gold, take a quick look over your shoulder. You'll see my ghost there, Bartell, just like it was twenty years ago when I put a slug in you."

Bartell's swart face went bone-white. He was a superstitious man, and the old sheriff's threat hung in the air like a curse.

"I ain't scared of you, Griz, and that goes for your ghost."

Panic was in Bartell as he thrust the muzzle of his gun against Hockaday's belly and squeezed the trigger.

Up at the railroad tank, the roar of the incoming locomotive prevented Hockaday's son from hearing the gunshot that dropped his aged sire writhing at Bartell's feet. And then Bartell was sprinting up the slope, a man with a train to catch.

III

Lone Wolf Ranger

AN EASTBOUND passenger train was pulling away from the water-tank at Massacre Wells when Texas Ranger Jim Hatfield reined his magnificent sorrel stallion, Goldy, to a halt on a ridge flanking the railroad tracks a mile from

the tanks.

This was the first trace of civilization Hatfield had seen in a week of riding across country, and he let Goldy rest as he waited for the train to approach and pass. The engineer and firemen waved to him as the San Antonio train hurtled by; women and children in the blurring daycoach windows got a thrill as they saw the Ranger rear his great horse in a dramatic and spectacular salute for their tourists eyes.

After the last coach had passed and the woodsmoke and drifting steam had drifted away, Hatfield put his eyes on the glint of water marking the pool of Massacre Wells. This was where he anticipated a two or three day visit with his old friend Griz Hockaday, who lived yonder with his son Larry, the railroad tank tender.

It would be a welcome respite after the rigorous journey behind them from the upper reaches of the Texas Panhandle. In New Mexico, two days ago, they had experienced a particularly violent sandstorm; for thirty-six hours in a row they had gone without water, which made Massacre Wells especially inviting.

Whenever he found himself in this part of Texas, Hatfield made it a practise to drop in on Sheriff Hockaday, the blind man whom Hatfield counted as one of his favorite people. Griz Hockaday had already earned himself a spot in the honor roll of Texas' heroes, along with Travis and Crockett and Houston, when Jim Hatfield had joined the Frontier Battalion of the Texas Rangers to become a star-toter also. During his rookie years, Jim Hatfield had come to love old Griz like a father.

Visiting the old man today was taking Hatfield a day's riding out of the way—he was bound for Presido on the Rio Grande after cutting across New Mexico's portion of the Staked Plains—but it would be worth it, just to know the joy of his coming would bring the old man. Added to that, the pleasure of anticipation for Hatfield had telegraphed the news of his intended visit to old Hockaday better than two weeks ago.

The strain of the horseback journey from the Panhandle, during the hottest season of the year, showed on the fatigue lines graven deep into Jim Hatfield's face, in eyes that were raw and red from alkali dust and sun glare and hot winds.

He was a ruggedly built man, this Texas Ranger who was known throughout the Rio Grande country as the "Lone Wolf" because of his preference for working on difficult cases without the assistance of other Rangers. No one, meeting him, could have guessed his age accurately; anywhere from twenty-five to thirty-five, the guesses went.

His hair was black as an Indian's, his eyes flecked with green in their depths. Because the Rangers wore no uniform as such, a passing rider would have ticketed Jim Hatfield for a wandering cowhand. His flat-crowned gray stetson, dark with the grease and smoke of a thousand lonely campfires it had fanned into being; his high-heeled Kangaroo leather boots with star-roweled spurs he seldom used on Goldy; his bibless levis and chocolate-brown batwing chaps with silver tie conchas thonged along the flaring leather—these were the commonplace garb of the range rider, not the lawman. A stranger's suspicious eye could seek in vain on Hatfield's hickory shirt for a law badge of any kind. Hatfield preferred to work incognito wherever possible, and for that reason kept the silver-circled star of the Texas Rangers concealed in a special compartment of his left boot.

The bone-stocked guns and the well-oiled cartridge belts, each loop filled with .45 ammunition at all times, were not the mark of the lawman any more than the cowhand of the time and the place. It was a deceptive picture which Jim Hatfield presented to the casual eye of the public, and a picture that was to his liking. The better known a Texas Ranger became, the more risk of being bushwacked he took.

The east-bound train had vanished into the heat haze by the time Jim Hatfield reached the amphitheater between the sandy foothills and the railroad with its sidetrack and watertank. Hatfield saw no

signs of life around the shack just east of the pioneer graveyard, where old Sheriff Hockaday had been living the last time he visited Massacre Wells, two years back.

But that didn't mean anything, Hatfield told himself as he dismounted at the muddy edge of the waterhole and knelt down to get his drink before Goldy waded out into the pool and fouled the water. No, it merely meant that old Griz was taking his noonday siesta, for Hatfield's telegram had said to look for him around sunset today. He had made better time crossing the New Mexican Llano Estecado than he had expected, this time of year.

Hatfield bathed his face and neck with the cool, slightly saline water, and pulled Goldy back to keep the stallion from foundering himself. Too much water could be deadly to man or horse on a day as hot as this one.

THE RINGING shout came at the Ranger from all directions, bouncing in echo off the walls and roofs of the broken-down shacks which rimmed the waterhole. A generation ago, when the railroad had been building west, this had been an important settlement for wagon freighters and stage coach traffic. The coming of steel rails had put Massacre Wells out of existence.

"I know it's you, Larry, so show your mangy hide!" Jim Hatfield called out, recognizing the exhuberant voice of the sheriff's son. "Where in hell are you?"

Larry Hockaday stepped into view from behind the corner of a building that had once housed a saloon and gambling hall. He was wearing bibbed overalls and the striped denim cap that identified him as a railroad section worker, and his sun-browned face was split by a welcoming grin as he hurried over to meet the visiting Ranger.

"You never look a day older, Jim!" young Hockaday said. "If you knew how much Dad was lookin' forward to this—here, let me take care of Goldy for you. We're usin' the old Wells Fargo depot for a barn. I'll give this bronc a grooming and grainin' he won't forget."

Hatfield turned his reins over to Larry Hockaday. Goldy, as if remembering the hospitality he had received at this lonely outpost on the occasion of their last visit, was eager to be off. Oats would go good after the scanty forage of the Llando Estecado, dead buffalo grass and prickly pear.

"Is your father still at the same shack, far side of boothill?" Hatfield asked. "I'm sure looking forward to seeing the old man."

"Same hogan, and Dad's probably asleep, otherwise you'd be hearing him whoopin' and hollerin' by now," Larry said, leading Goldy away. "He may be blind, but he can hear a flea foraging around in a coyote two miles off."

Jim Hatfield, saddle weary as he was, broke into a jog trot as he skirted the cactus fence bordering the Massacre Wells cemetry and headed up the cinder path toward the Hockaday cabin. Hatfield had a bottle of the old sheriff's favorite whisky in the saddlebags Larry would be hanging up in the barn. Tomorrow come time to leave, he would present the bottle to the old timer.

"Griz," the Lone Ranger sent his shout ahead of him as he neared the front corner of the house. "If you're asleep, you better be waking up. We got plenty to talk about while I'm—"

The glad words tapered off to a gagging whisper in Hatfield's throat. As he rounded the corner of the cabin and stepped into the shade of the old man's ramada awning he found himself staring down at a figure grotesquely sprawled on the clean-swept earth by the front door.

It was old Griz Hockaday, lying face down on the hard-rammed dirt, one arm at his side, the right arm outflung, as if asleep.

Long experience with frontier violence had given Jim Hatfield an uncanny instinct to smell out the presence of death, and the Dark Angel's presence was very strong here; no sleeping man could lie that motionless, however natural the pose might be.

Hatfield slowly raised his hands hat-brim high, knowing he was only moments away from death

And then, stepping nearer, he saw the slow-spreading puddle of blood creeping out from under the old man's chest. Flies had discovered the crawling red rivulet which was following a spur-scratch in the dirt.

"He's committed suicide," Jim Hatfield muttered aloud. "Being blind was more than he could endure."

And then, even before he saw no gun in evidence, no weapon of any kind, Hatfield rejected that first conclusion. Griz Hockaday was simply not the breed of coward who would take his own life, no matter how hard his lot.

Hatfield tugged off his stetson out of respect to his old friend. The fact that the blood was still thin enough to flow was proof that Hockaday was not long dead. Another confirmation of that fact was the warmth of the old sheriff's cheek when Hatfield touched his hand to it. He had been alive within the hour!

"If he didn't shoot himself, then who did?"

The question broke through the stunned shock of grief which had been the Ranger's first reaction to his grisly discovery. The hackles rose on his neck-nape with a chilly sensation as he realized that at this very moment, the gun which had killed Griz Hockaday might be covering him.

The Lone Wolf came to his feet, forcing grief and personal sentiment out of his mind for the time being; time enough later to grieve about the murder of an old friend, if murder it was.

Running footsteps reminded him that the dead man's son was hurrying over to the house after stabling Goldy. Quickly, to spare Larry Hockaday the shock of stumbling upon this grim picture as he had just done, Jim Hatfield turned and raced back around the corner of the house, narrowly avoiding a head-on collision with young Larry.

One look at the frozen features of the Texas Ranger's face was enough to kill the buoyant grin on Larry Hockaday's face.

"Is—something wrong, Jim?"

Hatfield said gently, "Anyone living here at the Wells besides you and your Dad, Larry?"

A puzzled expression crossed Larry's honest, wide-open eyes.

"Not since the company's survey crew used the old Emigrant House to bunk in, five-six months ago. Why, Jim?"

Hatfield persisted, "No hoboes kicked off a freight train, no saddle bums camping in one of the abandoned shacks, no passing prospector? You're sure nobody's been around?"

Larry shook his head. "Nobody, absolutely nobody, Jim." The young water-tank tender said in a dead voice, "Dad's had a heart attack, hasn't he? He's dead, isn't he?"

The Lone Wolf's eyes narrowed momentarily. Then he rejected the thought that Larry Hockaday could have murdered his father. The two were too close for that; it was unthinkable.

"He's dead, yes," Hatfield broke the news bluntly. "I just found him, so I don't know the cause of death . . . but it could be murder."

The two of them rounded the corner and halted before Griz Hockaday's corpse. It was Larry who squatted down and with infinite tenderness, rolled the old man's limp, slack-muscled shape over on his back, to reveal the bloodsoaked shirt, the oozing bullet hole with the black powder-burned cloth rimming it, just above the old man's belt buckle.

"A point-blank shot, inches away," Jim Hatfield said grimly. "Within the past half-hour, I'd say. And it didn't kill your father instantly. See where the blood from his wound is smeared by his body crawling forward over it? He pulled himself toward the door, after the bullet dropped him."

Drawing a sixgun Hatfield stepped quickly through the open door of Hockaday's cabin and had his quick look around the single room. It was extraordinarily neat, considering that bachelors dwelt here. The cabin concealed no lurking murderer. Going out the back door and circling the cabin, Hatfield saw no footprints on the wind-swept, rock-hard adobe soil.

"Any one of a hundred people out of Griz Hockaday's past could have shot him," Hatfield told himself. "A sheriff with thirty-odd years behind the star, West of the Pecos, makes lots of enemies."

RETURNING to the ramada, Hatfield found Larry fanning flies away from his father's dead face.

"I saw Dad's killer, I talked to him," Larry Hockaday said in a dull, sleep-walker's voice. "He must have fired the shot when I was fillin' the tender of the San Antone Flyer otherwise I'd of heard it."

For a moment, Hatfield believed Larry was out of his head.

"You saw the killer? What do you mean?"

Larry Hockaday shrugged. Grief was too heavy in him for him to care about anything.

"A stranger got off the El Paso Express at 9:35 this mornin'. Said he was an old friend of Dad's. They visited for a couple of hours, I guess, because Mick Kelso boarded the San Antonio Flyer at 11:40."

Hatfield's jaw dropped in amazement. "Mick Kelso, you say?"

Larry nodded. "That was the name he gave me, when he got off the first train. Then, just before the San Antone rattler pulled out, Kelso came puffin' up the hill, told me he'd had a hell of a nice chat with Dad. Waved good-bye as the train pulled out. I finished my work and headed for home to rustle up a snack—and then I saw you waterin' Goldy over at the pool."

The Lone Wolf Ranger shook his head in bewilderment. "It doesn't make sense, that Mick Kelso could have murdered Griz."

"You mean you know Mick Kelso?"

"Sure," Hatfield said. "He's the warden down at San Castro Prison, has been for

the past five years or so. Mick Kelso's no killer, I'd stake my life on that."

Larry Hockaday shielded his father's dead face with his Stetson and came slowly to his his feel, like a man in a daze.

"That's the name this hombre give me when he asked me if Dad was livin' here at the Wells."

Hatfield reached out to grip Larry's shoulder. "Wait a minute. Describe this hombre who hopped off between trains. Was he about sixty, white goatee, pot-bellied, weighed in the neighborhood of two-fifty, two-sixty pounds?"

Hockaday shook his head. "This fellow was clean shaven, scrawny as a longhorn in drought time, middle-aged, claimed he used to be a John Law, and knew Dad in the old days."

"Then he was an imposter. Off hand, I'd say he might have been some owl-hooter Griz sent over the road to the San Castro pen, somebody who knew Mick Kelso. Criminals often give as an alias the first name that pops into their heads."

Larry Hockaday was still benumbed with shock and grief, unable to absorb the full impact of this tragedy. "No use tryin' to telegraph down the line and have this killer picked up off the Flyer," he said heavily. "Nearest telegraph station is half a day's ride away, at Grocky's Peak. Wires don't follow the rails, they cut straight acrost the desert."

Jim Hatfield's highly-sensitive instincts, as a manhunter and a trained professional lawman, were rolling in high gear now. A man with as many enemies in the frontier underworld as this old sheriff had made during his career behind the star expected to be ambushed, sooner or later. And the stranger who had given the name of a Texas penitentiary warden to Larry Hockaday less than three hours ago was, in all probability, the actual killer.

But by now, that unknown, nameless bushwacker was a good twenty miles away, and putting space between him and Massacre Wells at better than half a mile a minute as the San Antonio Flyer raced eastward across the trans-Pecos badlands. He could, and probably would, quit the train soon and vanish into nowhere, leaving not a clue behind.

"We're too far from a coroner to take your Dad in for an official autopsy," Jim Hatfield said. "The dead don't keep in hundred and ten degree heat." The Ranger's glance lifted to the nearby graveyard. "We'll bury him this afternoon, Larry. But if it's humanly possibly, I'll pick up his killer's trail. I don't have to tell you what I thought of Grizzley Hockaday."

Larry shook his head morosely. "Unless I lay eyes on that hombre again, he'll never be caught, Jim. Hell, he didn't leave a trail. You can't follow a shadow, or where a shadow's been."

It was at that moment that Jim Hatfield caught sight of the white bone needle cluched in the arthritic fingers of the dead sheriff's right hand, the needle he had been using to separate the colored horsehair strands for the halter he was braiding. The resemblance of that bone spike to a pencil directed the Ranger's glance over to the spot on the hard, clean-swept ground of the ramanda floor where Hockaday's out reaching hand had been resting when death had overtaken him. Excitement suddenly gripped the Ranger.

"Larry! Look!" Hatfield cried, pointing to a series of scratches in the dirt. "Your Dad left us a message."

IV

Dead Man's Message

THE letters and figures which a dying man had scratched into the dirt made no sense to either of the men at first glance:

HIX NEXT L.L. 1867

"All I know for sure," Larry muttered, "is that that writin' wasn't here this morning. I've sprinkled down this dirt too often not to of noticed."

"It's got to mean something," the Lone Wolf said tensely. "Your Dad knew he

was dying and he meant this for our eyes. That word 'Hix.' It could be a name. Ever hear Griz speak of a Hix?"

Larry shook his head. "Dad wasn't one to reminisce much. He was a lone wolf, like you. The name Hix means nothing to me."

Hatfield went on to study the letters "L.L." They conveyed no intelligence to his groping mind. The four numerals, 1867, were quite probably a date which Hockaday considered important. Following the 7 was a scraggly line made by the bone stylus, where death had interrupted Hockaday's last message.

"Where was your father," Hatfield asked suddenly, "in 1867?"

The dead man's son shrugged. "That's twenty years ago, before he lost his eyesight. At that time the county seat was at Lost Lode, the minin' camp in the Cascabels. When it petered out and they moved the county courthouse over to—"

"Larry, you're on the right track!" Hatfield cut in excitedly. "You've solved the riddle of that 'L.L.' It must stand for 'Lost Lode,' the town where your Dad had his sheriff's office in '67!"

But Larry Hockaday failed to share the Ranger's enthusiasm.

"Guesswork, Jim, nothin' but guesswork. Nobody's lived in Lost Lode since the mines petered out, ten years ago or more. It's just a ghost town now, Jim. Bigger than Massacre Wells, but just as lonely."

A strange excitement thrilled through the Ranger's being. The dead man at their feet had lived long enough to scribble a clue in the dust—nine letters and four numerals—which, if their meaning could be deciphered, might clear up the mystery of his murder.

"I've been in Lost Lode," Hatfield said, "when it was a thriving boom camp. That's where I met your father. You and your mother were living in El Paso because old Griz wanted you close to schools and churches, two things which Lost Lode couldn't offer."

Larry fought to get his voice under control again.

"If Dad's mind was clear after that slug knocked him down, clear enough for him to scratch a message in the gumbo, then why didn't he leave us the name of his killer? He knew you were due here today. Why didn't he give you something to go on, Jim?"

Hatfield was silent for a long interval. Finally he said, "I've got a hunch Griz's mind was clear as a bell at the end, Larry. What good would it have done to identify his killer by name, even if he had known? He was blind, remember, so he didn't get a look at whoever gunned him down. Unless his killer was somebody you and I also knew by name—"

"Maybe his name was Hix!" Larry cut in. "The killer, I mean."

Hatfield shook his head. "I'm inclined to think that Hix, whoever he is, is the next victim this killer aims to tally. 'Hix next.' It sounds reasonable, doesn't it?"

Larry Hockaday shrugged. "I suppose so. But unless we knew who this Hix hombre is, and where he lives, there's nothing in God's name we can do to warn him."

The Lone Wolf Ranger, his brain on the elusive trail of a hunch that seemed to be skirting the edges of a truth just out of reach of his intelligence, went on doggedly. "I'm not ready to agree to that, Larry. Your Dad gave us a name, Hix, and he gave us a location—Lost Lode. If—"

"Assuming the initials L.L. mean that ghost town."

"With nothing else to go on we've got to do some assuming, Larry. And your father gave us another piece of definite information: a date. His death, his killer—they are tied up, somehow or other, with someone named Hix, a place we know to have figured in your father's past, and a definite year, 1867. I have a hunch those scraps of information are going to put a hangnoose around somebody's neck before this thing is finished, Larry."

The two of them carried old Hockaday inside and bound him in a tarp. Then, with picks and shovels from the railroad's section gang toolshed, they picked out a spot under a weeping willow tree in the

emigrant's graveyard and spent the rest of the day digging the three by six excavation for the old star-toter's final resting place.

They burried Griz Hockaday at dusk, when the cool shadows of evening began to lift the sweltering heat, and when they had finished shaping off the grave mound they returned to the shack where the old sheriff had met his mysterious end and Jim Hatfield sat in Hockaday's rocking chair and watched the first stars come out.

LATER, after they had rustled up a meal and Hatfield had tended his horse over in the old Wells Fargo building, Larry spoke for the first time since he had mumbled an awkward prayer over his father's grave hours before.

"His murder has got to be solved, Jim. You're a Ranger. Murders are your business. Have you formed any ideas at all on how to get about trackin' down that hombre who got off the train this mornin'?"

Hatfield smiled in the darkness.

"Tomorrow early, I'm heading on south," the Ranger said. "My boss over in Austin, Roaring Bill McDowell, has assigned me a case in Presidio, involving some border-hoppers on the Rio Grande. But I've got no deadline to get there, and I keep remembering that Lost Lode isn't too far out of my way."

Larry Hockaday asked hopefully, "You're going to prowl around Dad's old stamping grounds?"

"A few old timers still live there. It has a Wells Fargo relay station still in operation, on the Marfa-Presidio run. If an hombre named Hix ever lived in Lost Lode—in 1867, say—I'll be getting somewhere."

A long run of silence built up between the two men.

Finally Larry said, "I didn't pay much attention to this jasper who claimed he was an old friend of Dad's, but I can tell you this, a fact that struck me as curious at the time. All his clothes were new. Hat, jumper, overalls, boots, all brand new."

Jim Hatfield felt his pulses leap. "Why in hell didn't you tell me that before? That little detail opens up a whole new line of thinking, man!"

Larry Hockaday was startled. "It does? How?"

Out of the darkness the Ranger's voice was vibrant with rising excitement: "Let's ask ourselves why any man would bloom out in an all-new oufit at once. He might have on new boots, or a new John B., but how often does a man in cowboy duds blossom out with new gear from head to foot?"

"You got a theory, Jim?" young Hockaday asked blankly.

"I sure as hell have. Remember my hunch that this stranger might have been recently released from the state pen at San Castro, because he gave you the warden's name as his own? Well, one of the first things a homicidal maniac does when he gets out of jail is to go gunning for the lawman who put him there. And newly-released prisoners are outfitted in new duds, remember."

A shocked oath escaped Larry Hockaday. "You figure if you can find out from San Castro's warden the names of any convicts he's released in the past month or so, you'll have narrowed down the search for Dad's killer? By gosh, Jim, I can see now where you earned your rep for bein' the cleverest Ranger in the business. The way your mind makes something out of practically nothing amazes me."

As if he hadn't heard the compliment, the Lone Wolf's words rushed on, in the manner of a man thinking out loud:

"As soon as I get to Presidio I'll telegraph the real Mick Kelso at San Castro and find out if he's recently released a man who'd been arrested twenty years ago by Sheriff Griz Hockaday. The warden may be able to pinpoint the killer's home address for me. But on the way to Presidio, I aim to drop in and nose around your father's old stamping grounds in Lost Lode. There's still the chance that there's somebody named Hix around that ghost town whom our killer has marked

for murder the same as your Dad."

Larry Hockaday whispered vindictively, "If you do dab your loop on Dad's killer, don't send him back to prison. Gun him, Jim."

V

Trouble on the Trail

SUNDOWN the following day found Jim Hatfield and Goldy in the first creases of the hills marking the lower knees of the rugged Cascabel range, fifty miles short of Lost Lode town.

Behind them was another fifty miles of hard riding, across the pie-shaped wedge of Jeff Davis County, aimed like an arrowhead on the map of Texas with its tip touching the canyon of the Rio Grande, and so into the northernmost corner of Rio Grande County, where Griz Hockaday had kept law and order during his stormy career.

Downriver, another two or three days' ride from here, was Jim Hatfield's official destination, Presidio, where a Ranger assignment awaited him. But tonight, the Lone Wolf Ranger was making camp alongside the old stage road which snaked over the Cascabel divide and on to Ruidosa on the river above Presidio.

This road has been built for the big ore wagons from the mines in the upper Cascabels; its terminus, in the old wild days, had been the boom camp of Lost Lode, important enough to be the county seat, but not important enough to go on living when the mines petered out.

Before dawn this morning, shaking Larry Hockaday's hand as he saddled up to quit Massacre Wells, Hatfield had admitted that the side trip to Lost Lode might be a futile one. All he had to go on, actually, was the assumption—which had seemed the only plausible answer, yesterday—that the initials "L.L." in old Hockaday's last message stood for Lost Lode.

Now, a day later, Hatfield realized he could be off on the wrong track entirely. The letters L.L. might stand for the initials of the sheriff's killer, even.

As purple twilight crept down the east slopes of the Cascabels, Hatfield put Goldy out on picket, spread his tarp and bedroll, and went about gathering mesquite chips and dried cowchips for a supper fire.

He had traveled this trail before, and knew a secret which most riders on this road did not know: a couple of hundred yards up the mountain slope was a cold-water seep, hidden in the pit of a narrow defile which kept the passing wagoneer from spotting the green palo verdes and tamarisk bushes which indicated a spring.

Hatfield emptied the last of his Massacre Wells water from canteen to coffee pot and was balancing the latter utensil over two rocks bracketing his small, Indian-style campfire when he heard a faint rumble of hoofbeats in the night.

Long schooling in caution sent the Lone Wolf Ranger retreating into the shadows, away from the flickering light of his campfire. This was cattle country, and the approaching rider could be, and probably was, perfectly friendly. But a Texas Ranger never took chances.

Fifty yards out, the rider reined up; his horse exchanged tentative whickers with Goldy, staked out some distance from camp. Then the traditional halloo reached Hatfield's ears:

"Howdy the camp!"

Hatfield checked his sixgun out of pure habit. The voice had a weary timber to it; a rider who had put a lot of distance behind him today, most likely.

"Ride on in," the Ranger called back, "and light. You're just in time for supper."

Saddle leather creaked. An iron-shod hoof struck sparks from a flint boulder. Tipping back his Stetson, knowing the rider wouldn't be able to spot him back in the shadows, Hatfield waited until horse and rider crossed over from the Wells Fargo road and halted. The man was a rawboned, predatory-looking hombre of forty-odd, dressed in dusty cowboy garb.

"Seen your fire," the rider said, eyes seeking for the man who had called to

him. "Know there's usually water where there's a camp, and me and my nag got a thirst. We've rode over from Marfa today."

Jim Hatfield saw that the man was not packing sidearms or saddle gun. A pair of tooled-leather saddlebags were behind his cantle, but no bedroll.

Chiding himself for his nervousness, the Ranger walked into the circle of light at his rolling, stilted gait.

"Light and cool your saddle, amigo," he invited the rider. "If you aim to do any more traveling tonight, you'll find the level road ends right here."

The man swung down from stirrups, removed his dusty hat and wiped his gaunt face with his sleeve. Saddle sore and gaunt with the fatigue of a day's riding, he looked harmless enough.

"I'm headed over the mountains, but I don't ride at night." The stranger grinned. He was partially bald, his hair showing white with roan threads scattered through it. "My name's Bartell. Marfa's the stampin' grounds."

It was Hatfield's turn to identify himself, but he decided against revealing his full name. He hadn't sized up this hombre yet. The brand on his shad-belly bay gelding, M L Connected, was a familiar one to Hatfield—the Marfa Livery. Bartell had rented this saddler from a stable in the nearest cowtown.

"I'm called Jim," Hatfield said meagerly, not offering to shake hands. "You're welcome to camp here. Grass is good, and I know where there's plenty of good water, back up the slope."

If Bartell saw anything sinister in his host's failure to give his full name, he gave no sign, but started unsaddling. A loquacious type, lonesome for company, Bartell babbled on: "I run a real estate business in Marfa, sideline of the X.I.T. cattle syndicate. Headin' for Ruidosa to appraise some grazin' land on the other side of the Cascabels. You wouldn't ride for X.I.T., would you, Jim?"

Hatfield picked up his empty canteen. The coffee was beginning to simmer filling the sage-scented night with its aroma.

"I'm just a drifter, you might say. Hand me your canteen, Bartell, and I'll fetch back some water. You couldn't find it in the dark."

BARTELL lifted his saddle off the gelding's back and tossed it to the ground as if it were heavier than it looked. The chink of loose metal from the saddlebags caught Hatfield's ear: the musical *tink* that only bulk gold could give. That confirmed what this man had said about being a land buyer. It also gave Hatfield the idea that Bartell carried hideout guns under that loose-fitting jumper. No land buyer with *alforjas* filled wish cash money would ride this wilderness unheeled.

"I've ridden this country thirty years," Bartell laughed, "and never knew of water at this spot, Jim."

Shouldering the carrying straps of his and Bartell's canteens, Hatfield asked casually, "I'm headed for Lost Lode. It's still about fifty miles off, ain't it?"

"Fifty miles and then some. A good day's ride on a good horse in this rough country. What on earth would you be wantin' in Lost Lode, if it's any of my business? The town's been deserted for years. When I was a kid it was boomin' with muckers and freighters and honky-tonk women."

Hatfield said non-committally, "I'm just covering territory, seeing the other side of the hill, reckon." He decided suddenly to make use of any information this local man might pass his way. "My Dad used to correspond with an old-timer who lived in Lost Lode during the boom days. Hix, his name was—don't recall the first name. Ever know a man by that name?"

Bartell, at the moment, was busy untying his bedroll from behind the cantle of his saddle. He paused to stare up at Hatfield.

"How's it spelled—H-i-c-k-s? There's a barber name of Hicks in Marfa, old fellow."

"This feller spelled it H-i-x."

Bartell studied for a moment, then shook his head. "No such family ever

lived in Lost Lode as I can recall."

Hatfield paused a moment, disappointment needling him. He had staked a lot on finding some clue in Lost Lode that would tie in with the enigmatic name "Hix" which old Griz had scratched out with his dying strength.

"Well," he said, "I better get up there to the seep and fill our canteens. Help yourself to the coffee."

Bartell was unrolling his soogans. In the act of turning away to head up the defile toward the hidden spring, Hatfield caught the faintest glint of fireshine on gunmental. He jerked around, knowing the canteen straps would entangle any attempt to draw his own guns, and then he froze as he saw Bartell leveling a long-barreled Colt .45 at his chest, a gun he had carried wrapped up in his bedroll, a common practise on the frontier where a man didn't want six pounds of iron riding his hip.

"Unbuckle your gun harness, Jim Hatfield," the rider said his slurring voice as malevolent as a snake's hiss. "Pronto!"

Panic put its acid on Hatfield's tongue. Bartell recognized him; perhaps he had been trailing him across the desert today, although Hatfield thought he had kept careful watch of his back trail.

"Huh? What did you call me?" the Ranger asked stupidly.

Bartell's lips peeled back from yellow-stained teeth.

"You're the Lone Wolf Ranger, and you've ridden all the way from Massacre Wells today in the time it took me to cover half the distance from Marfa. Don't deny it."

Pure shock was in Hatfield now. He let the canteen slings slip off his shoulders. Obedient to the threat of the leveled gun muzzle in the rock-steady fist of the squatting rider, the Lone Wolf Ranger began unbuckling his twin shell belts.

"How could you know about Massacre Wells if you haven't trailed me from there?"

A crooked grin bent Bartell's mouth now. "I saw you yesterday morning from the window of the El Paso-San Antonio train, just after it pulled out of the tank stop at Massacre Wells. Sitting your golden horse alongside the right-of-way, women in the coach were really squealing. You cut a dramatic figure against the blue sky, Jim Hatfield. Rearin' your bronc like a circus performer."

Hatfield tossed his holstered guns and cartridge belts to the ground. The desperate knowledge was in him now that he was face to face with Griz Hockaday's killer, who had gotten off the San Antonio Fyer at Marfa, spent last night in that cowtown, and then today had rented a livery horse and headed for Lost Lode. It was inevitable that the two of them would meet up on this twisting road into the mountains. . .

"I'll admit to spending the night at Massacre Wells," Jim Hatfield said, "but that doesn't explain why you called me—what name was it?"

Bartell chuckled throatily. His thumb dogged back the knurled prong of his sixgun. Hatfield wondered if he had toyed this way with old Griz yesterday before he shot him.

"I called you Jim Hatfield, the best known name, perhaps, in all Texas. The reason I put that tag on you, Hatfield, is because old Griz Hockaday told me he was expecting you at Massacre Wells yesterday. That's why, when the train passed you and your gold pony a mile out of the tank stop, I knew it was probably Jim Hatfield. Now, finding you here, I'm positive of it. You see, I don't believe in coincidences."

HATFIELD slowly raised his hands to hat-brim height. He had been outfoxed here; he knew he was moments away from death. The time had come to quit bluffing; it would gain him nothing.

"All of this talk can only mean that you shot old Griz with that gun. He was dead when I got to him yesterday, dead with a gunshot wound in the stomach."

Bartell's grin widened. "But he didn't die instantly. He couldn't have. He had to live long enough to mention that name 'Hix' to his son, the tank tender. He must

have said something about Lost Lode, to boot, or I wouldn't find you headin' for that ghost town tonight, Hatfield. As I said, I don't take stock in any such thing as coincidence. It's contrary to nature."

Hatfield felt the cold weight of despair in his vitals.

"Hockaday sent you to San Castro to serve time didn't he?" the Ranger said. "Your warden's name was Mick Kelso. That was the name you gave the sheriff's son at the Wells yesterday."

Bartell came to his feet. "Deduction, or did Hockaday spill that information, Hatfield?" said the outlaw. "Sure, I did time at San Castro. Twenty years. I only been out two weeks."

With a sideward swipe of his left leg, Bartell kicked the plump tooled-leather saddlebag nearest him, and once again Jim Hatfield heard the metallic chink of loose gold coins.

"Fifty thousand in those cantle pouches of mine, Hatfield," Bartell said gloatingly. "Loot of a bank I held up twenty years and more ago the Miner's Bank of Lost Lode. Hockaday was the sheriff at the time. He was the Johnny Law who put a slug in me. It was his posse that rounded up the rest of my gang. And old Griz trailed me all the way to Massacre Wells. He found me there, fainted from loss of blood, and brought me back a prisoner."

Jim Hatfield smiled grimly. "He caught you at Massacre Wells, and you killed him twenty years later at Massacre Wells. If that isn't coincidence, what is it?"

Bartell shrugged. "He went to live with his boy, who run the railroad tank and pumphouse. That ain't coincidence. What I'm leading up to, Hatfield, is that all those years I was in prison, that fifty thousand in bank loot was waiting for me, cached within a gunshot's distance of Massacre Wells. And before I'm through, Hockaday's won't be the only grave I'll fill. That's why I'm headin' for—"

At that instant, Hatfield's coffee pot boiled over. The sudden rush of steam, hissing from the campfire coals, was like a gunshot close to the ear in a man whose nerves were as tensed-up and fine strung as Bartell's.

Involuntarily, the outlaw's trigger finger jerked and the sixgun in his hand exploded.

But the accidentally-fired bullet hit no target; the sudden distraction from the campfire had caused Bartell's gun arm to jerk momentarily aside to the violence

A TALL TEXAS TALE

SMALL TIME

A MOTORIST was driving through a remote section of Texas and, after stopping in a small town for something to eat, noticed that his wrist watch had stopped. As he paused on the porch of the small cafe, he turned to a native lounging nearby.

"I wonder if you could tell me what time it is?" he asked.

"It's twelve o'clock," drawled the other.

"Only twelve o'clock!" exclaimed the traveler. "I thought it was much more than that."

"It's never more than that around this part of the country," replied the native. "It goes up to twelve o'clock and then starts all over again."

—E. J. Ritter, Jr.

of his start.

In that instant, Jim Hatfield made his choice. It would be suicidal to dive down for his sixguns, but the spilling coffee had momentarily blanketed the leap of firelight. Before the flames could spring up again, the Lone Wolf Ranger was racing off into the night, crouched low, and sprinting like a Comanche warrior.

He heard the slamming crashes of gunfire as Bartell opened up with his Colt, but the scream of lead was nowhere close to him and Hatfield knew by the way the slugs were ricocheting off the rocks of the nearby slope that Bartell had lost sight of him in the darkness.

Panting like a grounded fish, Jim Hatfield dove headlong into a dense tangle of chaparral at the mouth of the ravine which led to the spring he had been intending to visit.

Back at the camp, he saw the flames pinch out as Bartell, wise as a lobo wolf, kicked sand over the coals to extinguish the shuttering red light.

The odors of gunsmoke and burned coffee drifted toward Hatfield's nostrils. He took quick mental assessment of his situation. He had escaped with his life, which bordered on the miraculous, considering how slim his chances of survival had been a scant thirty seconds ago.

But Bartell held the advantage of being armed. He had undoubtedly spotted Hatfield's .30-30 carbine in its saddle scabbard, and he had forced the Ranger to surrender his sidearms.

"Hatfield," Bartell's jeering voice broke the stillness, "I got no quarrel with you, outside of you being a John Law. I can't risk droppin' off to sleep and havin' you sneak up on me like a damned Indian. So I'm ridin' on a piece."

Hatfield remained crouched in hiding, saying nothing that would give the outlaw a clue to his location. Bartell was trying to bait him into the open.

Across the distance, the Lone Wolf Ranger heard the crunch of Bartell's cowboots walking away from the campsite, in the direction of the graze where Hatfield had picketed his stallion. Was Bartell planning to steal Goldy, leaving him afoot?

Even as the thought crossed Hatfield's mind, he heard Goldy snort and prance away from the approaching outlaw. There was not enough starlight penetrating tonight's slight overcast for the Ranger to see man or horse, but the pawing of Goldy's hoofs told him that Bartell was probably jerking up the sorrel's picket pin.

"I'm ridin' on a piece, Hatfield," came Bartell's shout, "but you ain't ridin'. Not on this pony, anyway. Not ever!"

In the following instant Goldy trumpeted loudly—and then the horse's cry was engulfed in the terrible thunder of a gunshot.

Horror put ice in Hatfield's veins as he heard a brief flurry of threshing hoofs on rubble—the struggles of a downed horse—and then a ghastly, awful silence.

"I've killed your horse, Ranger!" Bartell shouted. "By the time you hoof it to Lost Lode, I'll be out of your reach in Chihuahua. And if you take the shorter walk back to Marfa, it'll take you better'n a day, and then two days more to reach Lost Lode on horseback."

AN INSANE, ravening urge to break out of hiding swept through Jim Hatfield's stunned brain. He wanted to race to the side of his slain horse, he wanted to defy Bartell's flaming sixgun and choke the life out of the convict with his own hands.

Goldy had been his faithful comrade in danger ever since Jim Hatfield had worn a Ranger's star. The companionship between man and horse was as close as if they had been blood brothers; any cowboy who worshipped his horse could understand the agony of grief and rage which the Lone Wolf lawman felt now, in this first stunning moment of loss.

But he choked back the hate-crazed curses which rose to his lips, knowing it would accomplish nothing to make himself a target for Bartell's lead tonight.

All he could do was swear to follow this killer to the ends of the earth, if need be, and make Bartell pay for this wanton

slaughter of a noble animal.

Bathed with icy sweat, choking back his anger and grief, Hatfield crouched in the brush and listened to Bartell's boots as he walked back to the campsite and his own mount.

"I'm takin' your Winchester, Hatfield," the outlaw called once. "Like I said, I'm camping on up the road a piece. But don't try stalking me. A full moon's due inside the hour and I sleep light as a cat. If you tried sneakin' up on me I could drop you half a mile off. Don't try it, see?"

Hatfield heard the creak of saddle leather, the thud of hoofs as Bartell reined his rented gelding back to the stage road.

Bartell was heading up the grade, but the Ranger knew the various Indian tricks the ex-convict might use to trap him. He could slide out of stirrups and hide in the brush, letting the horse trot on up the road. That way, with the carbine, he could pick off the Ranger after the moon rose.

The minutes dragged and Hatfield heard the hoofbeats ebb in the distance. The sky was pearl-pink in the east; he remained hiding in the brush, not knowing whether Bartell had this camp under his gunsights, until a dollar-round moon lifted over the rugged Santiago peaks and bathed the Cascabel foothills with its argentine witch-glow.

Over on the grazing ground he saw the motionless shape that was Goldy's sprawled carcass. He saw the glint of moonlight on the coffee pot, and the faint glow of a coal which Bartell had not extinguished.

As the moon lifted higher, Hatfield scanned the stage road and the open ground around it, alert for any moving shadow that would indicate that Bartell was skulking the vicinity, waiting for him to show himself.

Finally, as the minutes dragged with no sign of the outlaw, Jim Hatfield could endure it no longer. His grief for the dead stallion was such that, for the moment, it seemed to matter little whether he caught an ambush slug or not. Never in his stormy years as a Ranger had his morale sunk to such abysmal depths as now.

He emerged from hiding and stumbled across the moonlit sage flats towards Goldy. No shot rang out as he made his way, a plain target in the moonlight, over to the motionless shape of the golden sorrel.

Tears washed Hatfield's weather-bronzed cheeks, the unashamed tears of a man broken by a grief too great to hold in, as he sank on his knees beside the fallen horse.

Blood made a black, shining stain on Goldy's neck; Bartell had shot the horse in such a way that it had died instantly, at any rate, where the man could have been brutal enough to put a slug in the belly and leave the animal to die slowly, in agony.

"Goldy . . . I'll avenge this if it's the last thing I ever do."

Jim Hatfield reached out a hand and laid it on Goldy's neck, his coat gleaming in the moonrays like furbished metal. And at that touch, a miracle happened.

A wracking shudder went through Goldy's frame. A sighing exhalation, like a whisper, came from the stallion's muzzle.

"Goldy! You're alive." Hatfield whispered incredulously.

With a mighty effort, the horse got its head off the ground and jerked to an awkward reclining position, great paroxyms shuddering through the magnificent body.

Hatfield was momentarily paralyzed with disbelief. Goldy was a highly intelligent animal, but the Ranger had never trained him, circus style, to "play dead." And the blood leaking from the bullet wound under Goldy's roached mane was real enough.

Goldy whickeerd and lifted his head to nuzzle the kneeling Ranger. With a choked cry of thanksgiving the Lone Wolf Ranger threw his arms around Goldy's head and let his right hand explore along the horse's mane until his fingers reached the bleeding bullet wound midway to the withers.

"I savvy it now, Goldy boy," Hatfield breathed. "Bartell's slug creased you, close enough to the spinal cord to knock

you cold. Like the old-time mustangers used to do with wild horses on the range . . . graze 'em with a slug just enough to stun 'em so they could get a hobble on 'em."

Gripping Goldy's headstall, keeping up a running line of soothing chatter in the horse's ear, Jim Hatfield helped the stallion regain his legs. The shallow bullet burn, missing Goldy's spine by a fraction of an inch, had stopped bleeding. The horse was out of immediate danger. But the shock to Goldy's nervous system had not yet passed; he was in a dazed state, similar to a hospital patient half under the chloroform.

Wobbly-legged, Goldy staggered after his master as Hatfield yanked up the picket pin and led the stallion over to the mouth of the ravine leading to the seep. Every yard of that distance, Hatfield's senses were braced for the expected crash of a gunshot, but none came.

Bartell, it would seem, had not been lying when he said he was riding on up the Lost Lode trail to find a new campsite.

Safe in the chaparral, Goldy was glad enough to sink to his knees, his whole body shaking as if from the ague. But Hatfield had seen bullet-creased mustangs and knew that this semi-paralysis would gradually pass. By morning, Goldy would be himself again.

Leaving his horse, Jim Hatfield again risked a bushwhack bullet to return to the campground. As he had anticipated, his Winchester .30-30 had been removed from the saddle boot, and Bartell had taken the precaution of carrying off the Ranger's pair of sixguns.

He had also made off with Hatfield's saddlebags, the Ranger discovered next, and this was the most crushing blow of all. He carried an extra pair of Colt .45's, and several boxes of rifle and revolver ammunition, in those alforjas.

He found his grubsack where Bartell had overlooked it, and the coffeepot, and his bedroll and both his and Bartell's empty canteens. . .

Without weapons, it was foolhardy for him to attempt tracking Bartell tonight, especially in this bright moonlight. Besides, he didn't want to stray far from Goldy's side. As the numbness wore off in the bullet burn on his neck, the sorrel would begin suffering.

Toting his possibles back to where he had left his mount, Hatfield felt a vast contentment sweep through him.

"We're both lucky to be alive tonight, Goldy," the Ranger said drowsily. "You won't be in the best shape to ride tomorrow, more than likely, and by the time we reach Lost Lode, Bartell may be gone. But if so, there'll be another day, another meeting with that skunk."

THE FOLLOWING dawn, Hatfield toted canteens of water from the seep to the mouth of the ravine, letting Goldy drink from the crown of his Stetson. The sorrel was in fair shape, but would probably tire easily. Jim knew he would have to walk a good deal, and that his chances of reaching Lost Lode that night were slim indeed.

He was certain Bartell's destination was Lost Lode, for if he was merely heading for Mexico, he wouldn't have chosen to cross over the Cascabel divide when he could have kept to the valley and reached the Rio Grande by sundown. Bartell had some grim errand drawing him to the ghost town of Lost Lode, perhaps to gun a man named Hix—and maybe, with the ex-convict thinking Hatfield was afoot, which would give him time to waste, he might still be overtaken.

The sun was an hour high when the Lone Wolf Ranger started out, well aware that he ran the risk of blundering into an ambush at every turn of the trail ahead. But there was no alternative; every hour he delayed reduced his chances of catching Bartell still in Lost Lode.

There had been no recent traffic over the road, so Hatfield had no difficulty in reading Bartell's sign. Two miles above the campsight he saw where the ex-convict had reined off the road. Back in the brush he found where the man had camped for the night, where he had put

his livery pony on picket.

Reaching the first plateau of the Cascabel range, later on in the morning, Hatfield searched the snaky gray road leading into the hazy distance of the Cascabel slopes. He finally picked up a smudge of dust, a good five miles ahead of him and moving away, and from there on Hatfield moved along without fear of walking into a gun trap.

The day would forever rank in Jim Hatfield's recollection as one of the toughest, longest, most wearisome spans between sunrise and sunset that he had ever experienced. It was a steady climb all the way, and he walked as much as he rode, fearful of foundering the wounded Goldy.

They rested, at high noon, near a weatherbeaten signpost which told them they were no more than a third of the way to Lost Lode, although they had been on the road six hours. Bartell had long since outdistanced them to the point where his dust trace had disappeared.

Added to the oppressive heat of the climate was the tortue any range rider felt when he had to walk with his feet encased in tight-fitting, spike-heeled cowboots.

Sundown found them sitll a good ten endless miles from Lost Lode, and of the two, Jim Hatfield was in worse shape, here at day's end, than Goldy. The sorrel had almost returned to normal insofar as his coordination was concerned; but the Lone Wolf Ranger found it impossible to go on with his feet blistered and swelling inside the kangaroo leather boots.

Again they camped, this time near a watering stop where in older times the ore wagon teams had camped, Iron Pipe Springs.

The following sunrise found the Ranger physically refreshed by an unbroken night's rest. This second morning, he felt justified in his intent to ride Goldy the rest of the way, for the sorrel seemed completely recovered from the bullet crease under its mane.

From previous visits to Lost Lode, Jim Hatfield was not caught by surprise when, following the old stage road around a tight elbow end, he saw the weathered false-fronted buildings of the abandoned mining town curving along the gulch bottom ahead of him, here at the very crest of the Cascabel divide.

This was Lost Lode. In the near distance, Hatfield saw the boarded-up building with the charred, lightning-struck clock tower which had been the the Rio Grande County Courthouse back in the days when Griz Hockaday had occupied the sheriff's office in the jail wing. A block beyond was the historic old Miners' Bank.

These streets had known Hockaday's shadow in the brawling, violent heyday when Lost Lode had been teaming with miners and harlots, gamblers and outfitters, adventurers and outlaws. Now the street seemed totally empty except for a mongrel dog which set up an indifferent barking as Jim Hatfield reined Goldy over to the side of the road, knowing Bartell might be watching this lower entrance to the ghost town.

Some buildings had tumbled down in winter storms, roofs collapsing under the burden of winter snows. Here and there along the street, blackened empty gaps showed among the false fronts, like missing teeth in the jaw of a skull; fires which had occurred since Hatfield had last seen this camp.

The dog came loping out to greet the Ranger and his horse. He was friendly, judging from the lolling tongue and the wagging tail. Having sized up these visitors, the dog pricked up his ears as a voice—a woman's voice, incongrous in this wild setting—called from a building on Hatfield's left: "Meathead, where are you? Come here, Meathead!"

Meathead yipped once and headed back toward the sound of his mistress' voice. At that moment Jim Hatfield was startled to see a shapely young woman in a form-fitting gingham dress merge from the shadows of the porch, shielding her eyes against the sunglare as she looked Hatfield's way.

Hatfield's heart suddenly speeded up, but it was not due to the suden appearance of a beautiful girl. He was staring at the faded signboard identifying that building as the Lost Lode depot of Wells Fargo Express Company. The bottom line on that sign was what set the Lone Wolf Ranger's senses racing:

MELBA HIX, AGENT

At that moment the young woman, turning to go back into the express office, spotted Hatfield and his horse, half-hidden in the deep shadow of the jackpines at the edge of the courthouse yard.

"Ride on in, stranger, don't be bashful!" the girl called cheerily. "Nobody's going to bite you."

In the act of picking up Goldy's reins to accept the girl's invitation, Hatfield's shuttling gaze spotted another detail which brought him up short. There was a corral on the near side of the Wells Fargo building, and rolling in the dust there was a shad-belly bay gelding which the Ranger recognized as the livery nag Bartell had ridden to Lost Lode.

VII

Clues from the Past

"WHERE'S the hombre who owns that horse you got in the corral, ma'am?" Hatfield called back. "The M L bay."

The girl's reddish-gold hair gleamed brightly in the sun as she glanced toward the gelding.

"I wish I knew, stranger!" she answered the Ranger. "He booked lodging for himself and that nag from a Marfa livery barn and then, some time last night, he vamosed. Stole a prime blue roan saddle horse out of my remuda and left that crowbait."

Cinvinced that the girl was on the level, Jim Hatfield spurred Goldy over to the Wells Fargo hitchrack and dismounted.

"Are you Melba Hix, the express agent here?" he asked, half-hitching Goldy's reins to the chewed cottonwood bar.

"Yes," the girl smiled. "If you think it's queer, Wells Fargo having a lady agent, it's just that I keep house for a grandfather who refuses to leave Lost Lode, and with only two stages a month through here, I'm not overworked. Wells Fargo has to keep a relay station here in order to retain its transportation franchise, you know."

The girl was even lovelier than her first impression. She was around twenty-five, he judged, with a well-rounded figure and the honey-tan skin that came from vigorous health. When he looked into her blue eyes it was hard to keep his mind on business.

"Your interest in this horse thief, is it professional?" the girl said. "Or are you the previous owner of the stolen steed?"

Hatfield hesitated, and then, because he had come to Lost Lode in search of information, decided to show his hand. "I'm Jim Hatfield, a Texas Ranger," he said, "and your horse thief is at the other end of my manhunt. I'm sorry to hear he's vamosed."

The girl looked impressed. "Ranger Hatfield? My, grandpa will be sorry he missed you, he talks about you often . . . This horse thief showed up in Lost Lode around the middle of the afternoon, yesterday. He took a room at the Midway House—that's the hotel down the street yonder—and after he'd asked quite a few questions about the old days here in town, he went to bed. He must have gotten up during the night and skipped."

"What old timers did he ask about, ma'am?" Hatfield asked tensely.

"Oh, he didn't talk to me, he talked to Danny Osborne, who runs the Midway House. Danny is also our deputy sheriff and town marshal." Melba giggled. "Some town. Four people, counting him."

Jim Hatfield was too preoccupied with this information to share her amusement. If Bartell had come and gone, had he left any murders behind him? If he had, it was obvious Melba wasn't aware of them.

"I'll want to have a chat with Danny Osborne," Hatfield said, "but first I'm

more interested in anything you can tell me about any one living in this area, now or in the past, who bears the name of Hix."

The girl invited him into the shade of the Wells Fargo porch and the two seated themselves on a wooden swing facing the ghost town street.

"The only living Hix that I know of, besides myself, is my grandfather, the Judge," Melba said. "My folks are dead, and Grandpa has always said I'm his only kin. He's seventy-six."

Hatfield's eyes narrowed speculatively. "Why do you call him the Judge?"

Melba gestured toward the tumble-down courthouse across the street.

"Because Grandpa was a circuit judge back in the days when the mines were running full blast. He tried his last case more than fifteen years ago, when Lost Lode was on the decline, and then he moved to Frontera when the county seat was changed. He retired six years ago, when he was seventy, and came back here to live. Grandpa's an amateur prospector —I mean, mining is a sort of hobby with him."

A pulse ticked rapidly on Hatfield's neck. "Did you ever hear your grandfather speak of a sheriff named Hockaday?"

Melba laughed. "Old Grizzley Bear Hockaday? Indeed yes. They were the closest of friends. They used to have a saying, 'Hockaday catches 'em, Judge Hix hangs 'em.' Why do you aks?"

Hatfield said, "Where is your grandfather? It's terribly important that I see him right away. I'm not sure, but I think his life could be in danger, Melba."

The color fled from Melba's cheeks.

"Surely you're mistaken, Mr. Hatfield. Grandpa has been out in the hills the past three or four weeks—over at the old Glorious Dominion mine. He used to own an interest in that mine when it was a producer. He likes to go over there and putter around, every chance he gets."

A grim possibility was beginning to shape up in the Ranger's mind. He asked sharply. "Did this stranger ask any specific questions about your grandfather?"

THE girl shrugged. "You'd have to ask Danny. And you can't do that, because as soon as Danny found out the man had skipped without paying his overnight's lodging, he came over here and discovered my blue roan was missing, so he saddled right up and took out after the thief. Danny can read sign like an Indian."

Relief touched Hatfield. If a deputy sheriff was on the trail of Hockaday's killer, it took some of the pressure off him.

"What did you mean about Grandpa being in danger?" Melba Hix persisted.

"I spoke out of turn." Hatfield grinned ruefully. "But I might as well lay my cards on the table, I guess." He told her, then, what he knew of Bartell—of Sheriff Hockaday's murder, of his own escape from Bartell night before last, of the mystic words 'Hix next' which Hockaday had left behind.

"What it all adds up to, Melba," Hatfield wound up, "is that Bartell might have been sentenced to the San Castro pen by Judge Hix, and that when he found your grandfather was over at the Glorious Dominion mine, he stole a horse and headed there, aiming to bushwhack Judge Hix."

Melba said in a shaky voice, "In that case, I'm glad Danny is on Bartell's trail. The trail to Glorious Dominion is a difficult one, impossible to make time on. And if Danny catches up with that convict, he'll bring him back—dead or alive."

It was on the tip of Hatfield's tongue to comment that Danny Osborne, thinking he was pursueing an ordinary horse theif, might well be in desperate peril himself, facing an ambush at any turn of the trail. But that would only add to Melba's worries.

"If I can get a little rest and some food in me," Hatfield said, "I'll head for your grandfather's mine myself. Reckon Danny wouldn't object to a little help, in case Bartell proves hard to corral."

The girl jumped to her feet. "Of course," she said. "So few riders who hit Lost Lode this time of day ever stop over, I

didn't even ask you about eating. By the time you've taken care of your horse, I'll have some vittles ready."

By the time Hatfield had unsaddled Goldy and turned him into the corral with Bartell's bay gelding and the Wells Fargo livestock, Melba Hix called from the kitchen door in the rear to tell him chow was waiting.

When he reached her private dining room in the rear of the Wells Fargo building, he found a voluminous scrap book on the table beside his plate.

"This is where Grandpa pasted all the newspaper accounts of his career as a frontier judge," Melba informed him. "You say this Bartell hombre robbed the bank here twenty years ago—you'll probably find the newspaper story about it if you sort back to the clippings for the year it happened."

Hatfield opened the six-inch-thick book with trembling fingers. "The date old Sheriff Hockaday wrote in the dirt just before he died was 1867," the Lone Wolf said. "That was probably the year Bartell held up the Miner's Bank here in Lost Lode."

Melba peered over his shoulder as Hatfield flipped the pages of Judge Hix's fascinating scrapbook. It was a treasure trove of Old West memorabilia—yellowed newspaper clippings, pictures, reward posters of famous old-time outlaws, and other souvenirs.

"Your grandfather must have been a colorful character, Melba," Hatfield said. "Wait, what have we here?"

They were looking at a newspaper's front page with bold headlines, set in the florid Barnum type of the period, relating one of the wildest episodes in the history of Lost Lode:

BANKER BARRY WICKBURG IDENTIFIES BLAZE BARTELL AS BANDIT WHO ROBBED MINER'S BANK OF $50,000!

Sheriff "Grizzley Bear" Hockaday Trailed Masked Bandit Three Weeks, Captured Him at Massacre Wells; Not a Penny Found of Missing Loot

Judge Hix Sentences Bartell to Twenty Years in Texas State Penitentiary at San Castro; Jury Foreman Overmire Says "Should Have Hanged"

"That pretty well explains Blaze Bartells motives," Jim Hatfield mused, after reading the account of the trial. Bartell was a part-time miner and a laborer at the Lost Lode reduction mill, the newspaper said. "Any idea where this banker, Wickburg, might be living? Or Overmire, the jury foreman who wanted Bartell hanged?"

The girl said, "Old Barry Wickburg's still here in town. Overmire—I've never heard of him. Do you think they might be on Bartell's list of victims?"

"Anybody connected with that trial is in jeopardy, Melba."

The tantalyzing food which Melba brought him took Hatfield's mind off the clues from the past in Hix's scrapbook. Gone, now, was any shadow of a doubt but what Bartell and Judge Hix had something in common with Sheriff Hockaday.

Even more disturbing to Hatfield was the possibility that Bartell might have other men marked for murder. The newspaper story listed many other potential victims—Plamandon, the prosecuting attorney; Barry Wickburg, the banker who had identified Bartell as the hold-up man, despite the fact that Hockaday had not found the $50,000 gold loot on his fugitive; the jury members; a local newspaper editor who had demanded the hangrope for Bartell.

Hatfield was winding up his meal when he heard the screen door slam in the front of the building and a moment later a stooped, dessicated man of sixty-odd appeared in the doorawy. He wore black sleeve guards and a celluloid eyeshade and rusty, patched pants and shirt. He appeared highly agitated about something or other.

"Danny," the oldster greeted Hatfield in an excited voice, "how come your horse is—" He broke off, squinting myopically at the man at the dining table. "Oh. I thought you were Danny Osborne. Where's Melby Hix?"

Melba came in from the kitchen. "Just in time for dinner, Uncle Barry," the girl greeted her visitor. "This gentleman is

—" she hesitated, realizing the Ranger might wish to remain incognito. Then, getting Hatfield's nod, she went on, "This is Ranger Jim Hatfield, Uncle Barry, the famous Lone Wolf. Jim, meet Lost Lode's fourth and final citizen, Barry Wickburg. He's lived in this town ever since it started."

Standing up, Hatfield was in the act of shaking Wickburg's hand when a startling thought came to him.

Hatfield stood up and shook hands with the old-timer, then his glance shuttled down to Judge Hix's scrapbook. "You must be the witness who identified the bandit who held up the Miners Bank back in '67. Wasn't it your testimony that convicted Blaze Bartell?"

The old man nodded grimly. "Twenty year ago it was," Barry Wickburg muttered. "Bank never opened its doors again, after that blow. And Lost Lode folded up along with my bank." Wickburg waggled his head dolefully. "I've hung on, keepin' books for a dozen-odd minin' companies that still pay taxes on property in the county."

Hatfield said, "Did you know that Blaze Bartell has served his time and came back to the scene of his crime yesterday, Mr. Wickburg?"

The old ex-banker did not appear to have heard Hatfield's question. He said to Melba, standing in the kitchen doorway, "Where's Danny? I thought I'd find him here."

Melba shook her head. "I guess you didn't know Blaze Bartell was back in Lost Lode, or was. He stole my blue roan saddler during the night Uncle Barry. Danny's out hunting for him."

Barry Wickburg's jaw sagged open. "So that explains it," he said in a husky voice.

"Explains what, Uncle Barry?"

"Danny Osborne's horse just trotted into town, back to his home corral," the old banker said. "I thought Danny must of got into trouble, maybe, because—"

"Danny's horse back in town without Danny?" Melba's voice rose of an ascending treble scale.

"Not only that," Barry Wickburg said, "there's fresh blood spattered on Danny's saddle."

VIII

Trail of Blood

JIM HATFIELD walked swiftly out of the Wells Fargo building with Melba Hix at his heels. Guided by the girl's shouted instructions, he headed up the ghost town's wide, deserted street until he came to its only intersection, Bonanza Road.

Here, the town's only brick building—the two storied Miner's Bank, scene of Blaze Bartell's hold-up of long ago—stood opposite the second largest building in the mining camp, the Midway Hotel "Midway Between the Pecos and the Rio Grande" according to a faded legend in peeling paint across its clapboard facade.

Alongside the hotel was a corral for the use of guests' riding horses. Standing hip-shot and head down at the closed gate of the corral was a jaded strawberry roan, empty saddle shining in the sun, frayed bridle dragging the dirt.

A moment later the Lone Wolf Ranger was jogging to a halt alongside the roan. Pads of foam dripped from the horse's flanks. The walnut stock of a Winchester carbine protruded from the scabbard under one saddle fender; a canteen hung from the dish-shaped Brazos horn, and there was a slicker-roll behind the cantle.

Melba Hix, a sob choking deep in her throat, came running up as Hatfield was rounding the horse's rump. She halted at his side and a low gasp of anguish escaped her as the two of them spotted the crimson splashes on the saddle pommel.

Flies buzzed around the bloodstains, which told more eloquently than words the disaster which had overtaken this hores's rider, somewhere back in the brooding, empty mountains.

"Bartell ambushed him," Melba Hix said, "without warning. If Danny had been expecting trouble he wouldn't have been caught with his .30-30 in the boot."

Knots of muscle gritted at the corners

of Hatfield's jaws. He rubbed a fingertip on one of the crimson splashes. The blood had dried, but was still tacky. The bushwhacking of Lost Lode's deputy was relatively recent, then.

Hatfield turned to face the girl, just as old Barry Wickburg rounded the corner of his bank and came hobbling up, badly winded by the unaccustomed exertion and the high altitude of this ghost town.

"You're taking this pretty hard, Melba," Hatfield said. "Was the marshal some kin? Was he an old timer?"

She shook her head, still staring mutely at the sinister bloodstains on Danny Osborne's saddle.

"An oldtimer? Danny was born in Lost Lode. He's just a year older than I am—twenty six. Too young to die."

Hatfield reached out to steady the girl who appeared on the verge of fainting.

"A few drops of blood on a saddle don't mean a man's dead," the Ranger said. "I'll be hitting the trail just as quick as you can furnish me with a horse, Melba."

The girl composed herself with a supreme effort of will power.

"I'll go with you, Jim," she said. "We know this had to happen somewhere along the trail to the Glorious Dominion. I can't endure the thought of Danny lying out there in the brush somewhere, at the bottom of some canyon, with the buzzards."

"Look," Hatfield said harshly. "You hustle back to your Wells Fargo remuda and pick me out the fastest pony you've got, understand? I'll be over directly to saddle up. My own horse needs rest and a chance for that bullet burn to heal."

As Melba Hix turned and headed off to obey his orders, Hatfield shouted after her, "Bartell choused my sixguns and rifle. If you can rustle me up a pair of short guns, do so. Plus a canteen of water and some grub."

Melba nodded, and as she had vanished around the corner of the Miner's Bank, Hatfield turned to the old banker.

"Wickburg," the Ranger said crisply, "what does Danny Osborne mean to the Hix girl?"

"They figger on gettin' married, come fall. Osborne aims to put himself through minin' school in Colorado. Running this fleabag hotel don't pay much, but it keeps him close to Melby. She won't leave Lost Lode until the Judge—"

"*Bueno.* Listen, Wickburg. The man who drygulched Danny Osborne was on his way to the Glorious Dominion to murder old Hix, I'm certain of it."

Wickburg said grimly, "If it was Blaze Bartell, he'll be gunnin' for me, then. He swore from the witness stand, the day Sheriff Hockaday took him to San Castro, that he'd make me sorry I ever identified him in court."

Wickburg gestured toward the brick bank building across the street. "I can show you the bullet hole in the wall beside the cashier's cage," the old man went on, "where Bartell's slug passed clean through the teller who made the mistake of reaching for a gun instead of throwing up his arms during that hold-up. I was setting at my desk, same desk that's there now, and I was staring straight at Blaze Bartell's face when his mask slipped."

WHILE the senile old banker babbled on, Jim Hatfield was busy inspecting the hoofs of Danny Osborne's horse. He had some tracking to do today, and needed all the clues he could assemble.

"Never could understand why the jury didn't send Bartell to the hangman," Wickburg was saying. "Guess it was because the defense attorney claimed my poor eyesight made it possible that I identified the wrong man. And then, of course, there was this matter of Bartell hiding the $50,000 he stole. I always hoped, these past twenty years, he'd confess where that gold was, so's he could buy himself time off for good behavior. But he never did."

Hatfield came around the deputy sheriff's horse and halted alongside Wickburg.

"I'll need some information to go on, Wickburg. How far is it to the Glorious Dominion mine?"

"Twelve mile as the crow flies. It's at

the base of Thundergust Peak, if you know that landmark."

Hatfield nodded. Thundergust Peak had been visible all the way from Massacre Wells, the highest peak in the Cascabel chain.

"How do I find the trail—the one young Osborne must have taken? And after he was bushwacked, would the horse have cut across country or followed a road back to town?"

Beyond the bank building they heard horse's hoofs echoing between the battlemented rows of false fronts on Main Street. Melba Hix had wasted no time—and since there were two horses approaching, she had saddled amount for herself.

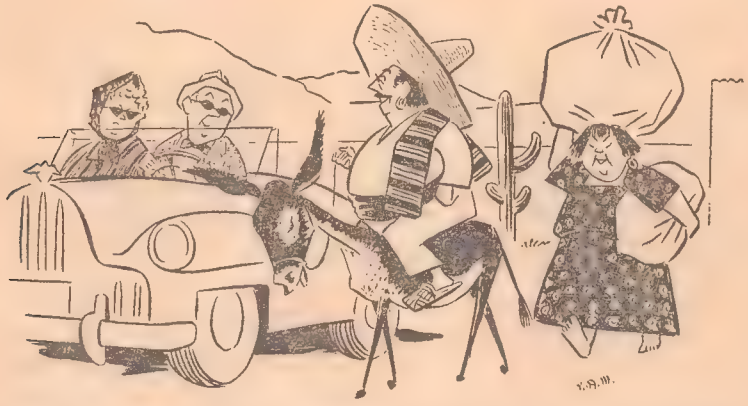
"You ride straight up Bonanza yonder," Wickburg said, pointing west to where the town's only side street snaked off into the shadow-clotted mouth of a canyon. "Once you get inside of that gulch yonder, you couldn't get lost if you wanted to, Ranger. That there's the old wagon road to the Glorious Dominion diggin's, the one they used to haul ore down to the reduction mill here at Lost Lode."

Hatfield turned to see Melba Hix rounding the corner astride a prancing pinto stallion. Trailing by a lead rope was a powerful black, on which Melba had cinched Hatfield's own saddle.

Not only had the girl readied two horses for the trail, but she had shucked out of her ginghams and was now wearing a man's shirt and a pair of leather riding breeches fitted into sleek calvary-style boots. A snow-white Stetson hung from a lanyard around her throat. At her hip, Hatfield noticed, was a pearl-handled .38 Colt.

Looped around the horn of his saddle, replacing the guns Bartell had stolen him, were two coiled shell belts and holstered Peacemaker .45's with staghorn butts.

"My grandfather's sixguns," the girl explained, tossing the black's reins to Hatfield. "I told him before he left for the mine that he shouldn't go unarmed, as many enemies as he had made while he was on the bench. But he said he'd be darned if he'd weight himself down with six pounds of hardware on each hip."



"My wife, Señor, she does not ride the burro because she does not own the burrow."

Hatfield stepped into saddle, smiling approval as he saw the dripping wet canteen slung to his pommel. He leaned from stirrups to snake Osborne's saddle gun from its boot.

"One more favor, Melba," the Ranger said. "Do you have a pair of binoculars over at your office? We could save ourselves getting bushwacked if we could check on things at long range—and Bartell stole my glasses with my saddle gear."

A frown carved its momentary notch between the girl's brows.

"We're wasting time," she moaned. "It may be too late to save Danny's life, but Grandpa's up there at the Glorious Dominion, alone and unarmed, and Bartell's had time to get there by now."

Wheeling her pinto, Melba spurred into a gallop and headed back toward the stage depot to get the binoculars Hatfield had ordered.

The moment she was out of sight the Lone Wolf Ranger said to Wickburg, "That was just a bluff to get her out of the way. I can't have a woman with me when I set out on a trail that's damned sure to end up in a gun battle. I want you to hold her here in Lost Lode, understand?"

Barry Wickburg nodded. "She'll be sore as hell, but I'll try to hold her back for her own good, Hatfield. If they's any place in the world a girl don't belong, it's out on that minin' road you're following today."

Hatfield thrust the deputy sheriff's Winchester into his own empty saddle boot and roweled the black into a gallop from a standing start.

While the black could not compare with Goldy, Hatfield could see in the first dozen yards that Melba Hix had chosen his mount wisely. The way the big black streaked up the grade and out of Lost Lode told Hatfield that this horse was used to high-altitude work.

Within moments the view of Lost Lode's mill chimneys and strung-out buildings along Main Street vanished as Hatfield entered the winding canyon which the Glorious Dominion road followed to the Cascabel diggings.

A HALF hour later he had climbed another thousand feet to the head of the canyon and had reached the ridge road which snaked off into the purple-hazed distance toward Thundergust Peak.

The rocky landmark, above timberline, seemed near enough to hit with a sixgun bullet; but in reality it was ten air-line miles away. From this distance, Hatfield could see the glint of the Texas sun on window glass, marking a shafthouse of the Glorious Dominion mine at the southern base of Thundergust Peak.

In the soft blowsand of the ridge road, Hatfield could see the fresh tracks young Osborne's pony had made, returning to Lost Lode today. There were other tracks, some of them obliterated by the vagrant winds which blew at this altitude, which the Ranger knew belonged to Blaze Bartell and Osborne earlier in the day, headed toward the abandoned mines.

Somewhere along the twisting miles of this road straddling the Cascabel divide, Hatfield knew that Deputy Sheriff Danny Osborne had been spotted by Blaze Bartell. The latter had probably holed up and waited for his pursuer to get within range of the Winchester carbine he had stolen from Hatfield.

Hatfield kept a careful eye on the fresh tracks made by Osborne's returning horse, every time a patch of loose soil made tracking possible. At every turn of the torturous trail he half-expected to see the sprawled corpse of the Lost Lode lawman, where he had fallen from the stirrups. Maybe Danny Osborne had caught a foot in stirrup and been dragged to his death by his own horse, in addition to having suffered a gunshot wound. This latter theory, however, Hatfield did not dwell on. His careful examination of the strawberry roan's hoofs failed to show any telltale bloodstains, as would have been the case if those hoofs had battered a man's body free of the stirrups.

Being unfamiliar with the land, Hatfield knew he would have to keep to the Glorious Dominion road. While there were undoubtedly shortcuts to Thundergust Peak, by way of the game trails he saw threading off into the chaparral here and there to the right and left of the road, he dared not take one of them unless he saw where Danny Osborne's horse had done so. To do so without a guide would have entailed running the risk of being lost for days in the tangled canyons of the Cascabel slopes.

He had been on the trail for two hours when he heard the sound of gunfire, somewhere ahead. A rifle and a sixgun, duelling.

His first thought was that old Judge Hix and Blaze Bartell were shooting it out at the Glorious Dominion shafthouse, until he remembered that Melba had said her grandfather was unarmed.

And then, rounding a shoulder of the Cascabel ridge, Jim Hatfield had his answer.

Hitched to a juniper snag just around the corner of the road was a dust-caked blue roan saddle horse, branded W Bar F —a Wells Fargo animal, and undoubtedly the horse which Melba had reported stolen from her personal remuda in Lost Lode.

A man's boot tracks led across the dusty mining road and vanished into the weeds on the east side of the mountain. And even as Jim Hatfield stepped down from stirrups and hauled his borrowed Winchester from scabbard, he heard a fresh break of gunfire from somewhere down the slope below.

Levering a cartridge into the breech of the .30-30, the Lone Wolf Ranger crouched forward and, moving at a lope, headed into the tangled chaparral to investigate the gun battle going on in the ravine below.

The slamming crash of a carbine told him that Bartell was not far below, but who was he shooting at? From further down the ravine, out of Hatfield's view, a sixgun was answering the rifle, shot for shot. The Ranger could hear the angry whine of steel-jacketed slugs ricocheting off rocks down there . . .

Then the shooting stopped and a heavy, brooding silence lowered over the mountain slope. The acrid smell of burned powder wafted to Hatfield's nostrils as he froze like a hound on point, keening the air to pick up any alien sound.

"You might as well show yourself, marshall!" came Blaze Bartell's roar, from a jumble of glacial boulders off to Hatfield's right. "You ain't got a chance and you know it."

After a considerable interval, a faint yell floated back up the ravine. "Go to hell. If you want me, come and get me."

Hatfield's pulse raced. Bartell's opponent was a marshal, which meant Danny Osborne. Danny, undoubtedly wounded, must have been bucked off his horse and had taken refuge in the brush. Throughout this long day, Danny Osborne must have been playing hide and seek with his bushwacker, who dared not ride on toward Thundergust Peak without making sure the Lost Lode marshal was taken care of.

With infinite caution, Hatfield made his way toward the tangle of boulders inside which Bartell was forted up. The rocks were a good fifty yards below the level of the road, and marked the end of an old rockslide which had scoured a naked scar through the greasewood and buckbrush of the mountain wall.

The avalanche had ended on a ledge of some kind, heaping up boulders where the vegetation could not close in; and in those rocks Blaze Bartell had chosen to hide himself from Danny Osborne's guns.

HATFIELD was forced, at this point, to leave the sheltering brush and cross fifty feet of open ground, stripped to the bedrock by the rockslide, if he were to get within sight of the ex-convict from San Castro.

The safe way to play it, Hatfield knew, was to lie and wait for Bartell to make the first move. The outlaw had no idea he had been trailed to this spot. But playing the waiting game, if it could possibly be avoided, was not the Lone Wolf Ranger's way. Especially when he knew Danny Osborne, a fellow lawman, was somewhere down below, possibly bleeding to death, perhaps running out of ammunition. Darkness was still several hours off, and Danny Osborne might need help long before then.

As Hatfield was in the act of moving out of cover, he heard Blaze Bartell call from the rocks, startlingly near at hand now, indicating that the outlaw had shifted position in the rock pile.

"If it's a waiting game you want, mar-

shal, so be it. I settled Judge Hix's score and that was what I come to Lost Lode to do. All I want now is proof that you won't start shooting if I leave this cover, marshal. I got no grudge with you. All I want is to get back to my horse."

A cold horror settled in the pit of Hatfield's stomach. There was a ring of truth in the outlaw's words. Judge Hix must be dead. Osborne hadn't overtaken Bartell; he must have run headon into the outlaw returning from the Glorious Dominion mine.

"You'll never straddle that horse again, Bartell!" Osborne's jeering shout came from below the rock nest. "Want to know why? Because my bronc has had time to git back to Lost Lode by now and when Melba Hix sees that roan, she'll know I ran into trouble and she'll come to investigate. And if you try getting back to the road, Bartell, I'll have you skylined. You want to risk that, you miserable whelp of a she-wolf, go ahead. I'll pick you off."

Hatfield heard the sound of Bartell's muffled cursing in the rocks. An instant later he saw the bald-headed ex-convict squirm into view, belly to the earth, sliding his rifle—the carbine Hatfield recognized as his own—before him.

Bartell's blood-shot eyes were fixed on the rimrock road overhead. In this instant, Hatfield got the complete picture. In order to get into the brush and back up to where his horse was waiting, Bartell had to cross this open stretch of avalanche scar, thereby exposing himself to Osborne. It was a frantic risk that Bartell, even now, was planning to tackle.

Hatfield dogged back the hammer of his Winchester. That tiny metallic sound brought Bartell's head lifting like a rattlesnake's. His eyes swung around, and then retreated behind narrowing lids. He was face to face with a Texas Ranger.

"Hatfield! I been afraid this would happen."

The Lone Wolf Ranger had Bartell between his gunsights now. It took a supreme effort of willpower not to squeeze the trigger and send a .30-30 slug drilling into the skull of the ex-convict who had murdered the blind sheriff at Massacre Wells.

"You're finished, Bartell" Jim Hatfield said grimly. "Let the saddle gun lie where it is, and get to your feet."

Lying flat on his stomach in the edge of the rock nest, Blaze Bartell knew it was impossible to get off a shot.

"I can't, Ranger!" Bartell said piteously. "The marshal from town is forted up in a prospector's shack down there. If I show myself he'll gun me down."

Hatfield grinned bleakly. Keeping Bartell in his gunsights, the Lone Wolf Ranger shouted to the unseen marshal in the ravine below. "Danny Osborne, you hear me? I got Bartell under a gun drop. This is Texas Ranger Jim Hatfield speaking. You hear me?"

IX

Disaster

AFTER a long interval of silence, Danny Osborne's sharp-edged voice called back suspiciously: "Ranger Hatfield, you say? Like hell. You'll have to come up with a better stunt than changin' your voice, Bartell."

Hatfield shouted back, "Melba Hix sent me up here from town, marshal, when your strawberry roan showed up with blood on the kack. Hold your fire, now, and I'll show myself."

Another pause, then Osborne's reply came. "*Sta bueno.* But if I see hide or hair of Bartell, I'll drop him."

Hatfield reached inside his left bootleg and removed his Texas Ranger badge—a silver star enclosed in a silver circle—from the secret compartment in the boot's lining. Pinning the star to his shirt, Hatfield stepped out into the open, not once taking his rifle off Bartell.

Glancing sidewise, for the first time the Lone Wolf Ranger saw the sod roof and mud-mortared rock walls of the prospector's shack fifty feet below. Beyond it, the opening of a mine tunnel showed in the wall of the ravine. Somewhere down

there, either inside the tunnel mouth or in the abondoned shanty, Osborne had hidden himself, out of Bartell's view.

"All right, I'm satisfied," Osborne yelled. "I won't be able to come up and help you hogtie Bartell though, Ranger. I'm packing a rifle slug in my left shoulder and it's giving me hell."

Hatfield turned his attention back to the trapped outlaw lying prone in the avalanche talus.

"Hold your fire, Osborne!" Hatfield shouted. "I'm having Bartell stand up now."

A cynical laugh floated up from the diggings below. "It'll go hard, not burning a cap on that son, but I'll do as you say, Ranger. You see, he murdered old Judge Hix in his sleep this morning around daylight, over at the Glorious Dominion where the old man was campin'."

Hatfield made a gesture with his rifle. "On your feet, Bartell. The easy way to handle this, pay you back for what you did to old Griz Hockaday, would be to gut-shoot you and let you lay. You'd have plenty of time to think things over before the buzzards settle in to clean you off the landscape."

Terror mounted in Bartell's red-shot eyes. Leaving his rifle on the ground, he came to his knees, arms reaching, and then to his feet. He was wearing Hatfield's matched sixguns, the Ranger noted, and Hatfield's holsters and cartridge belts.

"Don't shoot, marshal!" Bartell called tremorously. "Hold your fire, Ranger."

Hatfield sized up the slippery, roof-steep patch of rock between him and Bartell's vantage point and decided not to take the needless risk of crossing it.

"Unbuckle the belts next," Hatfield ordered, "and toss them and my guns over into the brush. Make one false move, Bartell, and it would be a pleasure to gun you down."

From the tail of his eye Jim Hatfield got a glimpse of movement, down below. He glanced around swiftly, to see Melba Hix's fiance emerging from the stone shanty below. A tin star glinted on Danny Osborne's shirt front. One shoulder of that shirt was drenched with blood from the rifle bullet wound in his flesh. The Lost Lode marshal held a sixgun in either hand.

Very cautiously, knowing two men were sorely tempted to shoot him without mercy, Blaze Bartell began unbuckling his shell belts.

"You don't understand, about Judge Hix," Bartell was sobbing as he worked with the buckle tongues, his hands trembling so he could hardly work. "When a man looks you in the eye and tells you he's lockin' you up for twenty years, Hatfield, and when you serve your time and realize that man is still alive, enjoyin' life, you wouldn't be human if you didn't try to square accounts."

"Like you squared accounts with the blind sheriff at Massacre Wells?" Jim Hatfield cut in. "Don't rowel me with that slobbering self-pity of yours Bartell, or

A SMALL TEXAS TALE

CRAZY MIXED-UP CHICKEN

AN enterprising poultry salesman once knocked at the door of a Texas backwoodsman's cabin and proceeded to demonstrate the unusual egg-laying abilities of a little red hen. He waved a yellow handkerchief and she layed a yellow egg. He waved a blue kerchief and she layed a blue egg.

He was about to pull out another colored cloth when the woodsman's old granny hobbled out of the bedroom waving a crazy quilt. Before her master could cover her eyes, the little red hen took a gander at the crazy quilt and stripped her gears trying.

—*Al Spong*

I'll shoot you the same as I would a snake, so help me!"

Bartell stopped his talking. Looping the gun harness together, he swung them pendulum fashion and tossed them in an arc, over Hatfield's head and safely into the chaparral behind the Ranger.

"Now the rifle," Hatfield ordered. "Make sure it lands in the brush, where it won't be damaged."

Very gingerly, Bartell reached down and picked up Hatfield's carbine. A hard throw, and the Winchester went like a javelin into the cushioning brambles behind the Ranger.

"All right, Osborne, I've drawn Bartell's fangs," Hatfield shouted down to the Lost Lode marshal. "As soon as I've got him handcuffed to a juniper I'll be down to give you a hand up the hill."

No sound came from below. Hatfield glanced around and was startled to see that young Osborne was sprawled in a crumpled, seated position against the rock wall of the shack where he had taken refuge from Bartell's guns.

"He ain't dead, he just fainted, Ranger!" Bartell said hysterically. "The kid's been bleeding steadily. He ain't dead, don't go gettin' any wrong ideas."

Hatfield ground his teeth in an agony of indecision. He could see for himself that Osborne was not dead, from the steady lift and fall of the young marshal's chest. Osborne had, in all probability, passed out cold from loss of blood. He must be gotten back to Lost Lode and Melba Hix's nursing care with all possible speed.

IN TIMES such as this, it went against the Ranger's grain to have to waste precious time and energy riding herd on a killer of Blaze Bartell's stripe. But to gun down an unarmed prisoner, under these circumstances, would but lower a star-toter to Bartell's level.

Hatfield set his rifle aside, cuffed back his Stetson and mopped his face with his bandanna neckerchief. For all he knew, young Osborne down there might be dying. On the other hand, he could not climb down to the rock cabin and leave Bartell on the loose.

"Come on across the slide area," Hatfield ordered his prisoner. "You heard what I told Osborne, I'll have to shackle you to a tree trunk while I take care of him."

Bartell licked dry lips. He had slid down to the rock nest from the upper side, but the angle was too steep to make climbing back to the road possible by that route.

"I'll take it on hands and knees," Bartell panted. "If a fellow slipped he could keep bouncin' down this arroyo for miles and wind up hashmeat for the coyotes."

Hatfield said bitterly, "I don't much give a damn if you do slip, Bartell, but hurry it."

Bartell got down on all fours and started crawling. He had perhaps ten feet of open rock, stripped of topsoil and offering few handholds to cover before he reached the brush where Hatfield was waiting.

Foot by foot, inch by inch, Bartell worked his way closer to the man he knew was dedicated to the job of getting him back to the hangman's gallows at San Castro. To Bartell's deranged mind, the prospect of stretching hemp was secondary to the fact that he had at least gained his revenge on two of the four men he had set out to punish.

Down in the ravine in front of the rock cabin, Osborne had not moved since he had keeled over in a faint. His sixguns had fallen from his hands; from this distance his face looked as pallid as a corpse's.

"Hurry it, damn you!" Hatfield urged the trembling outlaw, now almost within reach.

Blaze Bartell, eyes rounding with fear, had crawled to within three feet of safety now. Rearing to his knees, he made the mistake of trying to dive that last distance to the thick chaparral, his clawlike fingers reaching out for a handhold.

But Bartell's knees and toes lost purchase on the slick rock slope; his outgrabbing hands fell short of the nearest jackpine root and closed, instead, on Jim Hatfield's left ankle.

In that panicked moment of feeling the big outlaw's weight yanking his leg out from under him, Hatfield made his own grab for a supporting tree branch. Too late, he heard the snapping sound of wood fibers, as a piñon sapling snapped under his and Bartell's combined weight.

In the next instant, both men were tobogganing down the steep slope, tumbling away from the naked rock into scrubby brush which, while it cushioned their hurtling descent, was not heavy enough to break their slide.

Hatfield had the illusion that the sod roof of Osborne's shack was zooming up to meet him. He had a blurred impression of Bartell's hands being jerked free of their death grip on his boot ankle; he heard the outlaw's bawl of agony as his forearm was slashed by one of Hatfield's spur rowels.

They crashed into the shack roof below and were spared broken necks and bones only because the pole rafters of the sod roof were resilent enough to break their fall. As the shack roof collapsed, covering Osborn's limp body with debris, Hatfield and the outlaw rolled apart and went slamming into the thick weeds and brush which furred the base of the tailing dump from the prospector's mine shaft.

His brain reeling with shock and the dizzying pinwheel tumble he had taken, Jim Hatfield was the first to recover his senses enough to scramble to his feet. Sand and pebbles stung his face like assaulting bees, from the small avalanche which was bounding down the ravine in the wake of their slide.

Hatfield felt the salty-sweet taste of blood on his tongue; somewhere along the fall his lips had been smashed. His hands groped instinctively to his holsters as he peered hazily around for some glimpse of Blaze Bartell.

He spotted Bartell at the same instant that he made the discovery that both his guns were missing from their scabbards; they had fallen free somewhere along the path of their slide down the trough of the ravine.

Hatfield spat out blood and a cracked tooth. Through a tousled screen of hair he peered out on the dust-clouded scene. A biscuit-sized rock, bouncing down the slope, struck him in the chest and almost knocked the husky Ranger off his feet.

He heard a grunting, animal challenge behind him and turned in time to see Blaze Bartell charging him from a crouch, reminding him vaguely of a gorilla he had seen once in a Mexican circus. Instinct made Hatfield duck the haymaker which Bartell aimed at his jaw.

Bartell crashed into him and both men fell and picked themselves up as one. Bartell, on top of Hatfield for most of the short, brief slide, had been the first to recover. The Ranger felt Bartell's thumb and forefinger at his throat, squeezing, questing for the windpipe.

Hatfield brought a rock-knuckled fist up in a jab which cracked Bartell hard in the ribs. Twenty years on the rockpile had made Bartell a crack physical specimen despite his age; he outweighed the Ranger and had the advantage of reach. But the power in Hatfield's short, piston-like punch to the mid-section made a gasp of pain come from the outlaw; it softened him up, made his face fall apart in a blend of agony and fear; and while he had his foe off balance, Hatfield seized a fistful of Bartell's shirt and cocked back an arm for a smashing uppercut that would have ended the brawl then and there.

BUT THE punch, starting, never landed. All around them, disturbed earth and small boulders were raining into the brush; and one fifty-pound rock, smashing into another boulder behind Jim Hatfield, seemed to explode like a shrapnel to send one apple-sized fragment smashing into the Ranger's head behind the ear.

Knocked cold by a blow he had no way of ducking, Jim Hatfield sagged forward against Bartell. The outlaw, screaming oaths, pulled himself free of the Ranger's weight and stood there, crouched and dazed, unable to realize that fate

had intervened in his behalf that Hatfield was completely at his mercy.

Slowly, as the minutes dragged, the avalanching pebbles and sand slides tapered off. A heavy silence, broken only by the whicker of one of the horses up on the road, impinged on Blaze Bartell's ears.

The outlaw looked around for a weapon, but saw none. Hatfield's pair of Colts were somewhere down here, but where?

Sky shine glinted on metal protruding from Jim Hatfield's hip pocket. Stooping, Bartell tugged out the Ranger's pair of nickel-plated handcuffs, the manacles Hatfield had intended to use on Bartell a few moments before.

Bartell's glance, sweeping the roundabout area in search of a sixgun to finish off the Lone Wolf Ranger, came instead to the black yawning mouth of the deserted mine shaft overhead, entering the mountain wall at a forty-five degree angle.

At the same moment that the sadistic idea was born in Bartell's brain, he caught sight of Danny Osborne lying in the doorway of the wrecked cabin. The roof and one wall of the cabin had caved in under the weight of the two men's bodies, but the front wall of the shack had protected the Lost Lode marshal from the resultant slide of rock and debris.

Lurching forward, Bartell made his way across the pit of the ravine to where Osborne lay. Inches from the marshal's hand was a cocked sixgun, one of the guns Osborne had used to keep Bartell pinned to the rock cover up yonder.

Bartell picked up and cocked the gun. Two shots, now and two lawmen, that most hated of human breeds, would be plummeted into eternity.

"But that's too damn easy for a lawman to cash in his chips," Bartell said out loud. "Why waste lead on John Laws when there's a ready-made grave already dug for them?"

Reaching down, Bartell seized Osborne by the ankles and dragged him by brute force over to where Jim Hatfield lay unconscious. It was but the work of a moment to fetter the Ranger's left wrist to the young marshal's right wrist.

With the two lawmen thus handcuffed, Bartell seized the iron link between the two braclets and started dragging his two unconscious victims up the steep slope of the tailing dump until he reached the level top.

Pausing there to recover his breath, Bartell walked forward and peered into the sloping mine tunnel. It dropped off into inky blackness, not ten feet inside; the abandoned shaft became vertical at that point.

Someone had nailed a warning sign to the lintel of the shoring timbers which formed the entrance to the prospect hole:

WARNING—KEEP OUT!
SHAFT 200′ DEEP
FLOODED WITH PIZEN
WATER 100′ BELOW THAT

"My only regret, Johnny Laws," Bartell spoke to the unconscious men at his feet, "is that you aren't awake to know what I'm doin' to you. Don't reckon if you survived that two hundred foot dive that you'd feel much like swimmin' for long."

Bartell heaved a weary sigh. He had had enough brutality today to sate even his own inhuman appetite for violence. The murder of old Judge Hix this morning, over at the Glorious Dominion, had accomplished his mission into the hills; he could not work up too much personal interest in how Jim Hatfield and Danny Osborne died. He had not had twenty long years to hate them in.

All of a sudden, Bartell found himself eager to get back to Lost Lode. He had done a lot of daydreaming about how he would walk into the old Miners' Bank, twenty years later, and show banker Barry Wickburg the self-same specie he had stolen from Lost Lode two decades ago. And then, with Wickburg still unable to comprehend what was happening, shoot him in the face.

Bartell stooped and dragged the Ranger and the ghost town marshal forward until their bodies rested at the top of the ten-foot incline leading to the two hundred foot vertical shaft of the flooded-out mine.

Getting behind the unconscious lawmen, handcuffed together, Bartell got his boot sole planted solidly on Jim Hatfield's broad back and shoved.

The two limp bodies started sliding toward the inky chasm. Their sliding forms gained speed as, loose-muscled as bags of grain marshal and Texas Ranger slid over the brink and hurtled out into empty space and out of sight.

Rocks and dirt and bits of rotten wood tumbled into the shaft behind them. Out of the awful depths of the mine shaft came hollow, echoing noises and muffled splashing sounds from deep in the bowels of the mountain where the watertable stood a hundred feet deep.

These two lawmen had the deepest grave in Texas.

X

Delayed Doom

JIM HATFIELD opened his eyes on a scene which made no sense to him, even if his head had been clear of the throbbing pain from his bruised skull.

He seemed to be suspended in space, his entire weight hanging from his left wrist, his feet dangling over black nothingness.

Overhead, the ruddy glow of a Texas sundown seemed to be filtering through a tunnel of some sort and illuminating the jagged rocks and massive iron-bolted timbers of a mine's shafthead. Below the level of that upper tunnel, a vertical hole dropped away beneath them. Peering down past his hanging boot toes, the Lone Wolf Ranger could see the remote reflection of light mirrored in a tiny pinpoint on the surface of water far, far below.

His right arm was free and with it he reached up to see what was holding him. The circulation of his left arm had been cut off at the wrist, in a manner which he could not immediately grasp, so that there was no feeling at all in the appendage; that left arm could just as well have been a length of rope.

The groping fingers of the Ranger's right hand explored the familiar shape of a human hand—thumb, wrist, palm, fingers—for several moments before he realized it was his own left hand he was examining. It had no more feeling than a glove.

Then Hatfield's exploring fingers found the iron fetter locked around his wrist, and recognized that bracelet as one of his handcuffs. And at that same moment, as his eyes became more accustomed to the gloom of his surroundings, the Ranger was astonished to find himself face to face with a man who, like himself, was hanging suspended in mid-air by one upraised arm.

Enough daylight filtered into the shaft for Hatfield to recognize the bruised, scratched and pallid features of the deputy from Lost Lode, Danny Osborne. The young lawman's eyes were open; his body, separated only by inches from Hatfield's swayed slightly as he shifted position.

"You awake yet, Hatfield?"

Osborne's voice sounded like a whisper from an opened tomb; the acoustics of this vertical shift translated his words into an eerie, unnatural timbre.

"I just came to, I guess. You're Osborne?"

"Yeah."

"Where in hell are we?"

Osborne's lips moved feebly: "That *buscador* I was swapping lead with when you showed up—"

"Bartell?" Hatfield interrupted.

"Yeah. You got conked by a rock, just as you were getting set to knock out Bartell. I was only half conscious myself, but I saw the rock hit you, saw you fall. Bartell used your handcuffs to latch our wrists together."

The truth came to Hatfield then, the sickening truth of where they were and how they got there.

"Bartell chucked us into that mine tunnel? And as we fell into the shaft, our handcuffed arms hooked onto something?"

Osborne nodded. "That's right, an iron brace rod jutting out from the old hoist

platform. I fell on one side, you on the other. If it had been a wooden beam, it would have broke."

Hatfield peered up at their handcuffed arms. He could but dimly make out the inch-thick, rusty iron rod sticking out from the bedrock wall of the shaft, the rod which was supporting their combined weight. They were like a pair of dressed hens hanging from a meathook in a butcher shop, the gruesome parallel flashed across Jim Hatfield's mind.

"You weren't unconscious when we got dumped in here?" the Ranger asked.

"So close to bein' out, I couldn't lift a finger to resist."

"I didnt' mean that," the Ranger said apologetically. "I notice the daylight's failing fast. How long have we been down here?"

"Seems like hours. But probably no more than thirty minutes by the clock."

It was getting darker in here by the minute. Hatfield felt cold prickles sting his neck-nape as he looked down into the black void below.

"How far is it to whatever we'd hit if we wriggled off that iron bar?"

"Couple hundred feet. I wish to hell we *had* dropped the whole distance, Jim. I got a bullet in my shoulder that's givin' me torture."

Hatfield fumbled in his chaps pocket with his free hand and took out a match. Striking it on his belt buckle and cupping the flaming sliver in the palm of his hand, the Ranger took quick stock of their situation.

THE IRON bar which had caught their plummeting bodies was about six feet below the level of the mine entrance tunnel. The walls of the shaft were slippery with dank moss and moisture. The matchlight failed to reveal any cavity in the rock wall where they might get a toehold and take some of their weight off their fettered wrists.

"No use even thinking about crawling out o' here, Jim," the Lost Lode deputy said bleakly. "I sized up the odds before you come to, when there was light enough to see by in here. There's nothing to hang onto, no way of hoisting ourselves up. We're doomed, any way you figger it."

Hatfield realized that pain and desperation were beginning to derange the young lawman's sanity. As the match winked out and left them in a horrible blackness, the Ranger said "How come you and Bartell were shooting it out down in this ravine, Danny?"

His motive was to get Osborne's mind off their impending deaths by talking about something, anything. The ruse worked. Danny Osborne said, "You said Melba had talked to you, so you know Bartell stole a blue roan from the Wells Fargo stables last night and lit out for the Glorious Dominion mine."

"Yes. And your horse came back with blood on the saddle. That's what brought me out here."

"I reached the Dominion just in time to see Bartell gun down old Judge Hix, Melba's grandfather," Osborne said. "I opened up on Bartell with my Winchester, but it jammed on me, defective cartridge caught in the ejector or something. Anyway, there I was, in the open, with Bartell heading for his horse and a long-range Winchester. Nothing I could do under the circumstances but ride hell-for-leather back along the road huntin' cover."

"And Bartell was chasing you?"

It was so dark now, Hatfield could not make out the details of the deputy's face though it was barely inches from his own.

"He not only chased me," Osborne continued, "but he put a Winchester bullet through my shoulder. Went clean through, that slug did. I realized I couldn't make it back to Lost Lode without a bandage to staunch the bleeding.

"So," the deputy continued, "I stayed with my horse until the road crossed above that rock cabin you saw me forted up in—old Grote Growbinder's mine, the one we're in now. I knew I'd be safe, down in his cabin. So I dived out of the stirriups, give my bronc a larrup to send him on, and I piled down to Grote's shanty

before Bartell could get within range."

"I wonder," Hatfield mused, "why Bartell bothered with you. I don't think he actually cared about you witnessing Judge Hix's murder."

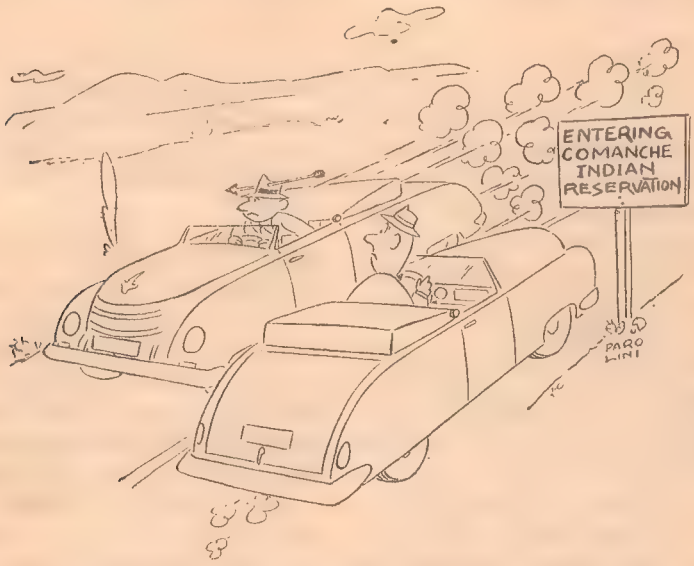
There was an interval of silence. The two men could hear the gurgle of underground waters somewhere in the black abyss below; the trill of crickets out in the brush of Growbinder's ravine, as twilight thickened over the Cascabel divide.

"That's where I was when you showed up," Danny Osborne said. "I didn't doubt you were a Ranger when I saw your badge, Hatfield, but I knew something you didn't. That was my Winchester you were using to cover Bartell with—and it was jammed tight. If Bartell had recognized that saddle carbine as mine, he could have gunned you down at his leisure."

Jim Hatfield found another match and struck it. Above him at about elbow height was the packing box of an axle bearing which, before Growbinder's hoisting machinery had been dismantled from this mine shaft, had supported a gearwheel of some kind. The packing box was stuffed with oily waste, looking bushy as a bird's nest. Sight of that greasy mass gave the Ranger an idea: touching the match to the waste turned it instantly into a smouldering torch.

"At least we won't have to die in the dark," Danny Osborne said. "Because we ain't got a chance, Hatfield, you know that. Nobody's traveled the Glorious Dominion road in years, outside of the Judge, and he's dead."

The flickering flames brought bad news to Jim Hatfield; there was no possible chance for them to extricate themselves from their predicament by their own strength. All the former wooden supports for the hoist winch had been removed and taken elsewhere, leaving only a few rusty iron members which had been set in concrete in the rock wall, such as the brace rod from which they were hanging.



"That may be," Hatfield said, "But I aim to see what I can do to attract attention to this jam we're in if it's humanly possible. Might be a prospector out in these hills, you know."

As he spoke, Hatfield reached up to grab a handful of the blazing waste from

the axle box. The flames blistered his fingers as, swinging his arm down and then up, he hurled the flaming bundle like a baseball up and out of the vertical shaft.

The burning oily waste landed somewhere in the mine entrance overhead; they could smell the smoke and see the flickering light on the rock ceiling overhead.

"I wonder," Danny Osborne mused, "what Bartell had against old Judge Hix. When I trailed him out from Lost Lode, it was because he'd stolen Melba's pet pony, and euchred me out of a night's lodgings at the Midway House."

HATFIELD could tell from the wild tremor creeping into Danny Osborne's voice that it would not take much to cause the wounded deputy to jerk them both off the protruding iron bar and plunge them, handcuffed together, to a ghastly doom at the bottom of the flooded mine. At all costs, the Lone Wolf Ranger knew he had to keep Osborne thinking about other things.

"That's quite a story, about Bartell," he said. "It started twenty years ago, when Bartell held up the Miner's Bank."

It took Hatfield a long time to finish his narrative, and by the time he had run out of words, the blazing oily waste up in the tunnel mouth had flickered out and the rosy, comforting glare of firelight up there gave way to an oppressive blackness.

Fighting back his own panic, Jim Hatfield ignited what was left of the axle packing and, painfully burning himself this time, tossed a second torch up beyond the ledge overhead. He felt a nagging lethargy in him as the numbness of his handcuffed arm seemed to be spreading.

"You and Melba aimed to get married, didn't you?" Hatfield asked. "I never saw a finer girl. She'd have ridden up here with me today if I'd let her."

Danny Osborne's voice came in a mumble. "She wouldn't marry me—as long as her grandfather was living. She'd promised to take care of him. And I wouldn't leave Lost Lode, not even to go to college, until Melba could go with me. Too late now, too late. Even with Judge Hix gone, it's too late."

Jim Hatfield heard a woman's voice calling Danny's name, and knew that his own brain was beginning to slip. He was suffering hallucinations, just as Danny's brain was skidding by merciful slow degrees into merciful oblivion.

"Danny! Can you hear me? Where are you, Danny?"

There it was again. A girl's voice, oddly muffled in Jim Hatfield's ears. He saw Danny Osborne open his eyes, saw the ghost of a smile flicker at the deputy sheriff's mouth corners.

"Melba," he whispered. "I can hear you, Melba. I love you."

Jim Hatfield's pulse hammered in his throat. If Danny had heard the voice, and he had heard it, then it couldn't be hallucination.

"*Melba!*" Jim shouted at the top of his lungs. "It's Hatfield, Melba—and Danny's with me! Can you hear?"

Somewhere near at hand, the Ranger heard rocks crunching, and then a shadow—the shadow of a girl's head—was thrown on the roof of the mine tunnel overhead by the blazing bundle of oily waste he had tossed out of the shaft.

"Yes, I hear you. Where are you?" It was Melba Hix's voice, shaking with fatigue and exertion. The girl was up there in the cavern mouth! "I saw the light, and I found Danny's hat out here."

"Down in the shaft, handcuffed together, Melba." Hatfield saw that Danny Osborne had slumped into a faint; he was not hearing the music of Melba's voice. "We can't budge out of here without help, Melba."

A little rain of sand and pebbles peppered Hatfield's upraised face. A moment later he saw Melba's fingertips clutch the rim of the drop-off above; then her head and shoulders appeared, silhouetted against the fireglow.

"I was riding by on the road," Melba was saying, "when I saw a fire inside Grote Growbinder's old mine tunnel. I

knew it had been abandoned for years, so I came down to investigate. I thought maybe it was Danny."

Hatfield said hoarsely, "Did you meet Bartell on the road up from Lost Lode, Melba?"

The girl said shakily, "I saw him coming, with your horse trailing him, Jim. That was just as it was getting almost too dark to see. So I reined off into the brush. After he was past, I decided to keep riding —until I reached the Dominion at the end of the road. I had to see if Grandpa was still alive."

Hatfield said very gently, "He isn't, Melba. But try to look at it this way. With the Judge gone, you and Danny are free to marry and move away from Lost Lode, free to live your own lives."

Melba Hix said, "I'm rested enough now to help you, Jim. Where's Danny?"

It had not occurred to Hatfield that the girl could not see either of them, down in this inky-black shaft.

"He's right here with me, and he's alive, Melba. Pass me down a rope, and then bring your horse down into the ravine and drag us out of here. Is Barry Wickburg with you?"

"No. He tried to keep from leaving Lost Lode alone—Barry is too old to ride."

Hatfield had a grim mental picture of Barry Wickburg, alone down in the ghost town, with a murder-mad vengeance rider stalking him in the form of Blaze Bartell.

"Please hurry, Melba," the Lone Wolf Ranger called.

But the girl had already left the mine tunnel, going for her horse and a rope, to drag the two men to safety.

XI

History Repeats

TAKING it easy, Blaze Bartell got back to Lost Lode a couple of hours after dark. He turned his horse into the Midway's corral, and let himself into the dark kitchen through the back door.

In all Lost Lode, but one window glowed with lamplight: Barry Wickburg's living quarters, upstairs over the Miners' Bank. From the darkened kitchen of the hotel across the street, the ex-convict could see the old banker eating a solitary meal in his room.

Slung across Bartell's brawny shoulder were the gold-laden saddlebags which, after twenty years, had returned to Lost Lode. It was within Bartell's power to walk across that street this very moment, knock on the banker's door, and show him those saddlebags of loot.

But Bartell was insufferably weary. He had not slept well since getting out of San Castro Prison two weeks ago, and his horseback riding from Marfa and up to the Glorious Dominion mine and back had worn him out.

Wickburg's showdown could wait; it had waited twenty years. Tonight there was just the two of them here in Lost Lode. Judge Hix was coyote bait up at the Glorious Dominion. The Wells Fargo office was dark and deserted, and Bartell suspected that the girl agent had quit the town in terror after Danny Osborne's empty-saddled horse had returned from the uplands today.

After rustling himself a supper, Blaze Bartell made his way upstairs to his room, the room he had left shortly after midnight last night to steal himself a horse and hit the trail to Judge Hix's mine.

He hung the gold-laden saddlebags over one bedpost, his gunbelts, recovered from the brush where Ranger Hatfield had forced him to throw them this afternoon, over the other bedpost.

Then, without lighting a lamp or giving any other indication that Midway House had a guest sleeping under its roof tonight, Bartell undressed and got under the blankets. It could get infernally chilly at night, even in Texas, at this altitude.

He drifted off to sleep with the glimmer of the banker's lighted window across the street picking out the pattern on the faded wallpaper of the hotel room.

Dawn's red light was pouring into the Lost Lode gulch when Blaze Bartell

roused next morning. He felt completely refreshed and revivified by a night's slumber which had been undisturbed by the twinges of a guilty conscience.

Getting himself breakfast downstairs, Blaze Bartell hummed under his breath as he made his plans for the day. Pay the Miners' Bank a visit, across the street; reenact the drama that had transpired in that frontier bank two decades ago. Then hit the trail back to Marfa, and take a train to San Saba to look up Overmire, the foreman of the jury that had found him guilty of murdering Wickburg's cashier that day.

"And then," muttered Bartell, "there's nothin' to keep me from lighting a shuck to Chihuahua and depositing my *Yanqui oro* in some Mexican bank."

He took his time about eating. He even shaved and washed up. Then he returned upstairs for the tooled leather saddlebags, heavy with corroded specia.

He checked the loads in his sixguns, reminding himself that it was in this very hotel—he had forgotten which room—that he and his fellow bank robbers had laid their final plans to hold up Wickburg's bank, that long-ago day here in Lost Lode.

It was like history repeating itself, except that before Lost Lode had teemed with people, and this morning it was empty as a graveyard, its stampmill silent, its buildings falling into decay.

Leaving the hotel lobby and walking out into the brisk Texas sunshine, Bartell inhaled deeply of the winelike mountain air. It almost seemed as if the twenty lost years behind the gray walls at San Castro had never been; it was as if he was heading across the street to the Miners' Bank precisely as on that other morning, except for one important exception.

That morning in 1867, these selfsame saddlebags had been hanging empty over his shoulder. Today they were weighted with a fortune in yellow metal.

His boots made hollow ringing echoes from the weatherbeaten false fronts of stores and brothels and saloons round about. Down at the Wells Fargo building a hungry horse—the one he had rented at the Marfa stable, probably—was whickering for attention. Otherwise the ghost town was as hushed as a grave.

He thought of Ranger Hatfield and the young marshal who ran the hotel here in town. *They* had gotten themselves a deep grave, by thunder. About two hundred feet deep.

AT THE front steps of the corner doorway of the Miners' Bank building, Blaze Bartell paused to loosen his sixgun in leather. It gave him a feeling of power, knowing that his bank robbery had marked the beginning of the end for this mining camp. Lost Lode had never recovered; the loss of that $50,000 had upset its economic balance forever.

He tried the bank door and found it unlocked. Yesterday, asking his questions of young Osborne, he had found out a few details of Barry Wickburg's personal habits; he knew the old banker made a pretense of working at his desk, bookkeeping for various mining syndicates with property in the Cascabels.

Opening the bank door, Bartell peered across the deserted lobby. On the other side of the marble-topped teller's counter he could see the bald dome of Barry Wickburg's head, cowled with the familiar green eyeshade, probably the same one he had been wearing twenty years ago.

Wickburg looked up as he heard the ring of a man's boots crossing the lobby floor. His eyes were poor, he came to his feet now with a questioning expression on his face.

"Señor Wickburg?" Bartell inquired. "I got some money I want to deposit to my account in this bank of yours."

Wickburg gripped the inside edge of the marble counter as Bartell slid his gold-laden saddlebags off his shoulder and began unbuckling the flaps.

"You must be new to this neck of the woods, stranger," Wickburg said quaveringly. "This bank closed its doors fifteen years ago. I can't accept any funds for deposit."

Bartell grinned malevolently. This was the supreme moment he had been waiting for, a moment that surpassed the exhilaration he had felt gunning down the blind Sheriff Hockaday the other day in Massacre Wells, or Judge Hix up at the Glorious Dominion yesterday.

"I'm not new to Lost Lode, Mister Wickburg," Bartell said. "The name is Bartell. I got fifty thousand in specie here. You used to have room for it in your vault. Or do you remember?"

Barry Wickburg stared down at the golden cascade of coins which spilled from the open mouths of the *alforja* pouches. Then he looked up to meet the satanic strike of Bartell's eyes.

"You mean you're making restitution? You're returning the money you stole, after all these years?"

Blaze Bartell's hand dropped to his gun butt.

"You're confused, Wickburg," the outlaw said. "Remember in the courtroom, just before Sheriff Hockaday started me off for San Castro, I told you I'd be back to pay you off? But it's goin' to be in lead, not gold, Señor Wickburg. You—"

Something distracted Wickburg. He was looking past Bartell, toward the door of the lobby. There was a frantic, wordless appeal in that glance.

Even as Bartell's voice trailed off, another voice took its place, from across the room.

"You're covered, Bartell. Elevate and turn around, slow."

Bartell froze. Had those been the same words old Griz Hockaday had spoken, twenty years ago, when he had stepped into the bank to surprise a robber gang in the act of looting Wickburg's vault?

And then Bartell remembered something else. Hockaday's last words, up there in Massacre Wells. *When you face Barry Wickburg in the Miners' Bank, take a quick look over your shoulder. You'll see my ghost there, Bartell.*

A sick moan escaped Bartell's locked teeth. Hand jerking gun from leather, he turned to face the street entrance, fully expecting to see the transparent apparation of the murdered Griz Hockaday mocking him there, from beyond the veil.

But it was not the old sheriff's ghost framed in that doorway, with Lost Lode's sun-drenched street at his back.

It was another ghost. The ghost of Jim Hatfield, left arm in a sling, a pearl-handled sixgun in his right fist. Barry Wickburg recognized that .38 as Melba Hix's gun.

Hatfield saw the changing expressions of a man who was doubting his own sanity as his eyes flicked across the sagging muscles of Blaze Bartell's face, stark incredulity mirrored in the outlaw's strained and bulging eyes.

"You're not seeing things, Bartell," the Lone Wolf Ranger said hoarsely. "I'm alive and kicking, and so is Danny Osborne. He and Melba Hix will be waiting for me up the trail, seeing as how I had to use Melba's horse to make it down here in time to buck your play."

Blaze Bartell did not believe his ears any more than he had the testimony of his eyes. The long years behind bars had cracked something inside his skull, there could be no other explanation for it.

Bartell knew a bullet had no effect on a ghost, but he got his gun up and tripped hammer regardless. He got two shots away before the Ranger in the bank doorway, realizing it was his life or Bartell's, triggered Melba's .38.

His aim was rock steady and coldly precise. Barry Wickburg saw the little puff of dust spurt from Bartell's shirt where the .38 slug caught him, a bulls-eye to the heart. The banker's eyes followed Bartell's dropping, twisting form as it slid out of view under the rim of the marble shelf. In falling, Bartell's left arm caught the straps of his *alforja* bags and dragged them over the edge. The gold coins made a metallic jingle, like the tinkling of many bells, as they hit the floor and raced like little yellow wheels in all directions.

Wickburg's eyes met Hatfield's through a swimming veil of powder smoke. The death angel had signed Bartell's last receipt. The account was closed. And history had repeated itself in a stench of ghost-town gunsmoke.

Phil rode slowly towards the rocks, feeling his approach was being watched

The Candy Rock Kid

By JAY G. GIBBS

SHERIFF PHILLIP STRONG reined the pinto to a stop, and swept his tired eyes up and down the trailside. Hot weather made tracking difficult, and overhead—high in a cloudless sky—the Montana sun baked the trail's surface into unyielding hardness.

For the past few miles, in fact, since the sheriff first entered this rocky valley, he was following hoof-scrapes and scratches rather than actual tracks.

Pulling off his Stetson, Phil Strong wiped a sleeve over his sweaty forehead, and deepened the squint-lines around his eyes as he looked into the unmoving distance.

The man he was trailing was smart.

"Too damned smart," he muttered and kicked at the flanks of the pinto. He rode slowly, picking up the scanty markings where the outlaw's horse had drifted into loose dirt at the side of the trail.

Of all the wooly ones the sheriff had trailed, none was as wooly as this kid

Too damned smart, he thought again. Everything this yahoo did showed a cleverness Phil Strong seldom encountered in outlaws. Picking a Sunday evening to holdup the Bitter Root Saloon, now that was smart. Banks closed Sunday, saloon strong-box bulging with Saturday's take, walk in, shove a gun in Sharkey's big belly—real smart. No fuss, no muss, no bother. Right at seven o'clock, which was another smart move. The sheriff home eating supper, and Sharkey alone in his office counting tabs. Very simple. Too simple to be an accident. Oh, he was a smart yahoo all right.

The sheriff looked at the rocky cliffs surrounding him. A stupid man could bushwhack a pursuer in this country, and this one wasn't stupid. Worse yet, this outlaw knew he was being followed. Phil Strong slouched in the saddle. He was a big man, a big target.

Two days on a trail gave a good tracker a pretty fair idea of the man who left it. It was downright disconcerting to the sheriff, he couldn't figure this hombre out at all.

During the holdup, the man wore a mask and slicker, but Sharkey thought he was young. Phil was sure of it, because the man had to be young to keep up the pace this one set.

A young man that knew all the trail-covering tricks in the book. Rode his horse hard, but when the tracks got heel heavy—showing a tired animal—he would pause for a rest. Most scared saddle-tramps would ride a horse right down to a nub.

There were other things not in keeping with the average renegade too. Taking time to sand-down the firesite whenever he broke camp, that wasn't natural for a man in a hurry. Then, stopping by the Yellowstone to take that swim—barefoot tracks romping all over the river bank—and the printed message, scratched in the sand with a stick: "Come on in Sheriff, the water's fine."

Phil gave a sigh as the rocky walls of the valley dribbled down to flatten into prairie country. Prairie grass would make tracking easier, and open country would make it safer. Climbing down from the pinto, the sheriff picked up a piece of sod torn from the earth by the outlaw's horse.

"Well now." He studied the yellow tinged grass that clung to the clod, rolled the dirt in his fingers to feel the dryness. "Mister Smart can't be but about four or five hours ahead."

With a groan, he pulled back to the saddle, wiped again at his forehead, and set out over the monotonous prairie. The noon sun slipped an hour's worth into the west before he came upon the sod house.

He turned off the outlaw's trail, which led up to the house, and rode in a wide circle around the farm. When he found the tracks, leading away from the house, the sheriff knew the man wasn't waiting in the cabin for him.

At the gate, Phil yelled, "Hallo, the house."

He waited in his saddle for an answer. Prairie farmers liked to look before they welcomed.

THE cabin door cracked open to reveal a tall, gaunt woman dressed in faded calico. She wore a knit shawl over her shoulders, and held a .30-30 rifle in her arm.

"Hitch your horse to the water trough along side the house, Sheriff. I've been expecting you," she called, then disappeared inside.

By the time Phil got back to the cabin, the woman was ladling venison stew into a tin plate. She slid the plate on the table, and pointing to a splint-bottomed chair, said, "Well go ahead, Sheriff. Sit down."

"I don't mean to cause you any trouble, Ma'am." Phil sat down.

"Fed the other one. Might just as well feed you." She poured steaming black coffee into a thick mug, and placed it by the plate. "Besides, it's already paid for."

"It's what?" Phil asked.

"Paid for, Sheriff." She dug a calloused hand into the folds of calico dress to bring out two shinny dollars. "Look

here. A dollar for his, and he gave me another dollar for yours. He said you'd be along in about four hours, and you'd be as hungry as a horse."

"How long ago did he leave?"

"Like I told you, Sheriff, about four hours ago."

The woman eased to a chair across the table, and watched the big man eat. It wasn't until he wiped up the last trace of gravy, with a piece of cornbread, that she delivered the message.

"He said, I should wait until you finished eating to tell you."

"Tell me what?" Phil pulled tobacco and papers from a shirt pocket.

"He said—" she stopped to insert a fingernail into her tight-pulled hair and scratch— "now wait a minute, Sheriff, I want to remember his exact words. He said, 'Tell the Sheriff, I'm heading for the Candy Rocks, and if he don't loose my trail before he gets there, I'll be waiting.' There," she smiled and folded her hands on the table, "those were his exact words."

Sheriff Strong smoked quietly, and sipped at the suddenly bitter coffee. He knew the Candy Rocks.

One square mile of tortured, twisting sandstone. A thousand towering rocks and boulders, honeycombed with caves and winding tunnels. The Candy Rocks were the devil-made place for a sinner to hide, and finding a man in their twisted depths would be like picking a flea from a porcupine.

"This man I'm chasing," Phil said and looked at the woman, "he was wearing a mask during the robbery. Could you give me a description?"

"What robbery are you talking about, Sheriff?" The smile left her face.

"The one over at Bitter Root last Sunday. He held up the saloon for close to two thousand dollars."

"But, Sheiff," she shook her head unbelievingly, "I don't think this boy was sixteen years old."

"You must be mistaken, Ma'am." Phil smiled and said, "Surprising how a lot of them just look young. Like Billy the Kid, or take that Ringo Kid, why those two—"

"He was not over sixteen, Sheriff." The woman insisted. "Why I've raised two boys myself, and besides that I'm a pretty good judge of age. I'd take you for about forty, Sheriff. Right?"

"Thirty-nine," Phil admitted.

"Well, that young scamp!" She shook her head again. "He told me he was running away from home. Said you knew all about it."

Pushing back from the table, Phil Strong got slowly to his feet. He looked down at the woman as he picked up his hat. "To tell you the truth, Ma'am, there ain't much about this whole mess I do understand."

"Well," she chewed at her lip for a second, "I guess it's only right I should tell you. I don't want harm to come to the boy, but I guess I better tell you."

"Yes?"

"That boy, Sheriff. He's got a gun, and he can use it."

Phil turned at the door, and asked, "How come you know he can use it?"

"Because of a chicken hawk." She walked over to Phil's side, and pointed out the door. "One came swoopin' down for the hen-yard while he was eating. He shot from the door here."

Phil looked from the door to the chicken pen. It would be quite a shot. "Well?"

"Well," she said, "You want to see the hawk?"

PHIL looked back, touching at his hat, as he rode out of the yard. The woman didn't wave, only turned to walk back in the lonely cabin.

It was almost sunset when the sheriff rode into sight of the Candy Rocks. There was nothing sweet about the huge puddle of sandstone stretching up to the reddened sky like a warty growth.

From any one of a hundred jagged spires or pointed spickles, an approaching man could be spotted long before gun-range, and kept in sights right up to the end of a barrel.

Phil Strong rode slowly towards the

rocks. He felt his approach was being watched, through a peep-sight. It was one of those times when the gold star hung from his shirt as if it weighed a ton. As the rocks got nearer, an ice-cold trickle of sweat felt its way down Phil's spine.

Keeping his eyes constantly flicking over the rocks, the sheriff moved in. Listening for the sound of a shot, watching for the slightest movement, he rode easy in the saddle, ready to dive to earth at any instant. He was well within gun-range now, close enough to hear the wind.

A slight wind, hardly noticable on the prairie bottom, whinned and moaned through the rocks, magnifying itself into eerie harmonies around the gnarled stones. The blood-red sun threw ragged shadows to criss-cross over the broken chasms.

Phil's right hand rode lightly above the butt of his .44, and he licked at dry lips. Another twenty feet would put him in the shadows of the nearest rocks. This was the kid's last chance for a clear shot.

The shadows enfolded him like a mother's arms. He hit the ground running, and scramble between two boulders. Still nothing happened, and he couldn't understand. Quietly, he removed his spurs, an pulled out the .44 before winding his way deeper into the rocky morass.

Under a jutting tabled-rock, he paused to listen for a second. Only the whistling wind moved through the rocks, and he moved forward slowly. Looking back, he found the horse was already blocked from view by the stone walls. Sheriff Strong still had that feeling, the feeling he was being watched—through a sight.

It was getting dark fast, and the wind turned cold. Phil cursed silently at himself, for leaving the warm blazer tied to the sadle pack. A sage root caught at the toe of his boot, and the rough rocks tore at his hands with the fall.

Crawling into a scoop cave, the sheriff sucked at his bleeding knuckles, and swore. Somewhere—somewhere in this forrest of rock a sixteen-year-old kid with two thousand dollars, and a gun, was laughing at him. He pressed against the back of the cave, out of the wind, and wondered.

The big sheriff wondered why he should bother with Sharkey's money. Big, fat Sharkey. Only a good lawyer better than a crook himself. Sharkey wasn't worth this. He wondered why he didn't quit startottin', buy the little ranch he'd always wanted. It seemed the badge got heavier every year. He decided that he was too old to be playing hide-and-seek in a rock jungle, as he groped his way out of the cave.

It was dark now. A thin slice of moon was floating in the black sky, but it didn't throw enough light for a man to spit by. Phil used his hands, feeling his way through the rocks.

The sudden, sharp smell of smoke surprised him, and he flattened against the side of a boulder. Smoke meant fire, but Phil didn't think the kid would be stupid enough to risk a fire. Still sixteen years left a lot of room for mistakes. The sheriff hoped this was one as he edged cautiously forward.

In a little clearing, surrounded by craggly walls, a camp fire flickered brightly. Phil dropped to his belly, and eased forward. This was too good to be true. Hunched in front of the fire, hat forward and head in arms, sat the kid. Phil crawled stealthily—gun ready—toward the unsuspecting back.

He was close now, very close. Too close for the kid to try anything. Phil stood up as he said, "Okay, stand up slow, and turn around quiet."

The answer didn't come from the slumped figure. From the shadows, to the sheriff's side, a voice spoke out.

"Drop your gun, Sheriff."

Phil whirled, thumbed back the hammer, and peered into the darkness. He couldn't see a thing.

"Drop your gun, Sheriff." The voice repeated.

THE sheriff relaxed his gunhand, and the .44 clattered to the ground. It was embarrasing to admit to himself, he had been tricked. Twenty years a peace offi-

cer, and tricked by a runny-nosed kid. Phil looked down at the coat, held up by a forked branch with a blanket stuffed inside to give it 'body', it looked real, close up. From back in the rocks, the old trick had looked real enough to take him completely.

Phil Strong turned back to the darkness and yelled, "Okay, either shoot me, or give me some coffee. I'm about to freeze."

The boy that crawled from the shadows was big. Almost as big as the sheriff. He kept his gun leveled at Phil, while he walked over, and reached down for the sheriff's gun. Phil was ready, but the kid didn't give him the chance. He didn't look down at the gun as he picked it up, kept his blue eyes, and his gun, on the sheriff. Tucking the sheriff's .44 in his belt, the boy apologized.

"Sorry about the coffee, Sheriff. I run out of coffee yesterday."

The kid's easy smile showed Phil two buck-teeth. A little herd of freckles wandered over the pug nose. The woman had been right. This kid wasn't over sixteen.

"Well now, that's a shame." Phil thought if he could get the kid away from the fire, into the darkness, he might have a chance to take the gun. "I got plenty in my saddle bag, maybe we could go get it, son."

"Sheriff, if you'll look over there," the kid pointed with his empty hand, not the gun, "you'll find your saddle. I got your horse tied up with mine in a grass patch close by. Nice little pony you got, Sheriff."

"Thanks." Phil was glad of the fire. It made his face just naturally red.

The man and the boy sat across the fire from each other, blowing at their steaming cups of coffee. The kid was friendly and relaxed, Phil kept reminding himself about the chicken hawk. He talked to the kid. "How old are you, son?"

"About eighteen."

"How close is 'about'?" Phil asked.

"Well," the boy figured a minute, "I'm sixteen in two months now."

"That ain't very close to eighteen."

"Closer than further," the boy said.

"Yeah." Phil agreed, "I guess that's right."

They sat quiet, the boy watching the sheriff, and the sheriff watching the fire. Finally, Phil looked up to ask, "Where're your folks, son?"

"Dead. Mon, she died when I was just a kid, and Dad, he got killed in the war."

"Union man?" Phil asked.

"Naw. Paw, he wasn't Blue nor Gray. He peddled whisky to both sides. One night he was sneakin' into camp, and some sentry must of thought he was a spy. Anyway, someone shot him."

"Too bad." Phil waited for the boy to continue.

"Yeah. That was down in Kansas. I came on west, working at farmin' and ranchin' and savin' my money."

"What do you plan on doing with all that money?" Phil watched the boy over the rim of his cup.

"Just what I planned on doing all along. I'm going to detective school."

Phil strangled, spilling hot coffee all over his shirt. He coughed, as he asked, "You're what?"

"I'm going to detective school. Read all about it in the back of a magazine. Here, look for yourself." Digging in his shirt pocket, the kid brought out a worn clipping. He kept the gun on Phil as he handed him the ad.

Turning the ad, to catch the firelight, Phil read slowly,

"Learn to be a *detective*. Six months of *scientific detective* training, only one-hundred dollars. Many of our men are now Pinkertons or railroad police. San Francisco *detective* school. Big *diploma* given."

There was a blurred picture of a man in a derby looking through a magnifying glass. He wore handle-bar mustaches, and the one eye, the one behind the magnifying lens, was impressively big.

"Well now." Phil handed the limp paper back, "Aint that something!"

"Sure is," The kid agreed. He gave a yawn, but brought the gun up as he stretched.

"What's your name, son?" The sheriff asked.

"Ted. Really, it's Theadore, but everybody calls me, Ted." This time when Ted yawned, he forgot to bring up the gun.

Phil eased a little closer to the boy. Carefully, he kept his eyes away from the gun, and stared casually at the fire as he talked slow, "Yep, I reckon that detective stuff would be mighty interesting work." Leaning toward the fire, Phil guaged the distance between his outstretched hands and the boy's gun. "I imagine the railroad part would keep a man busy." He kept his voice soft and easy as he tensed up on his toes. Ready to spring, Phil drooned on, "You know, Ted. Checking train robberies, riding all over the blamed country in a big—"

Like a panther, Phil spun around and leapt, his strong arms grabbing for the boy and his gun.

The kid had moved, taking the gun with him. From a spot, three feet from where he had been sitting, he watched interestedly as Phil sailed into the night, grabbed at air, and thudded heavily into the dusty ground.

The fall knocked the wind from the big sheriff, and he lay quietly on the ground looking up at the boy. Ted smiled good naturedly, and continued the conversation. "Gee, I don't know, Sheriff. I think I'd like to be a Pinkerton best."

THEY spread their bedrolls side by side. Lying on his back, head pillowed on his saddle, Phil peeked out from under the brim of his hat.

The kid still wasn't asleep. Ted's wide blue eyes stared up at the stars, the gun was held at his side, and his lips were whispering softly. The sheriff had a funny feeling in the pit of his stomach as he slouched the hat back over his face. Until the boy finished with his prayers, Phil would concentrate on making the snores convincing. Then, he'd jump him.

The snores were convincing. The next time Phil Strong opened his eyes, a strip of new morning showed under his hat. He listened quietly for a minute, then, not hearing any sound, raised up to check the boy.

Ted was already wide awake. His blue eyes were wide and unblinking as he stared back at the night-chilled rattlesnake lying coiled on his chest.

Phil noticed the snake's head was down —not in strike position—but the bead-eyes were open, and the little forked tongue flicked back and forth, licking for sound.

Slowly, the sheriff forced his reluctant fingers towards the corner of Ted's blanket. The rattler's head came up, as the hand approached the head rose, until the minute Phil's fingers touched blanket, the snake was ready to strike.

The sharp chatter of rattles echoed over the rocks, and as the Diamondback struck, Phil jerked at the blanker.

The sudden slide of the blanket, under the snake, upset the strike, and the forward-hung fangs missed Phil's hand by an inch. Before the rattler had a chance to recoil, Phil stomped at the blunt head with his boot heel, and at the same time, reached down and pulled both guns from the unprotesting boy.

"You all right, Ted?"

Ted's lips moved a few times before his voice made it. "Sheriff, I didn't think you'd ever wake up."

Phil made the coffee strong. He handed a cup to the shivering boy and said, "Suppose you tell me all about the robbery, Ted. Maybe there's some way I can help you."

"Not much to tell," Ted said, "Probably about the way that Sharkey fellow must of told you."

"Go ahead, tell me how it happened from your angle."

"Well, I went into the saloon on Sunday afternoon. Someone told me Mr. Cuthers was in there, and I wanted to see him about a job on his ranch. He wasn't there yet, and I sort of stood around waiting for him to show up. I watched 'em play cards for awhile, then, this Sharkey asks me if I want to play."

"Wait a minute," Phil interrupted, "Let me get this straight. Sharkey asked

you to sit in on the game?"

"That's right. Oh, I've played a lot of poker, Sheriff. It wasn't nothing new to me."

"Sharkey's a pretty fast dealer," Phil said.

"You know, Sheriff, that's what some men told me in the cafe. Right after I lost my hundred and twenty-three dollars to Sharkey."

"Go on, Ted."

"Well, I guess I was pretty mad about loosing my detective money. Especially in a crooked game, so, right after dark I slipped into this Sharkey's office. He was counting money into a green box, and I just made him count me out a hundred dollars."

"A hundred dollars?" Phil stood up, "Sharkey says you took two thousand."

"He's a liar!" Ted stood up and stuck his face in the sheriff's. "He's a liar, Sheriff. I made him count me out one hundred dollars exactly. I even let the low-down cayuse keep twenty-three dollars just for the lesson he taught me."

"Listen, Ted," Phil placed a hand on the boy's shoulder, "you swear this on your honor?"

"Honest, I didn't take but a hundred dollars. Look in my saddle bag, that's all the money I got in the world."

Phil counted the money back in the sack. "Ninety-six, ninety-seven, ninety-eight. Ninety-eight dollars, that right, Ted?"

"That's right. I spent two dollars for our dinner. Didn't that lady give you your dinner?"

"Yes, I got fed." Phil smiled a little as he tossed the bag of money to Ted, "Here catch."

Ted caught the sack, and looked suspiciously at the sheriff. "What's this for?"

"You hang on to that."

"You mean you're letting' me go?" The buck teeth backed up a wide grin.

"No." The Sheriff erased the grin, "You're coming back with me. The town's been wanting to get rid of Sharkey for a long spell, and I guess we can start with his letting a kid gamble in his saloon, then, take it on from there."

"What about my detective school, sheriff?"

"Well, I don't know." Phil scratched at his chin, and studied the worried boy before him, "You don't strike me as the derby and necktie kind. Look more like sheriff material I'd say."

"You mean—you mean, you'll teach me to be a sheriff?"

They were on their horses before Phil answered the excited boy. "There's a lot a man has to learn to be a good sheriff, Ted. You can't go around robbing places, and making the law chase you all over creation."

Ted hung his head.

"Of course," Phil continued, "if a man was to bunk with a real sheriff, stay by him night and day, he might pick up a few tricks at that."

"Sheriff—" the blue eyes sparkled—"you got yourself a deal!"

Phil Strong looked at the beaming boy, and reached into his saddle bag. He pulled out Ted's old gun. "Here, Ted. Man's got to trust his sidekick."

"You're right, Sheriff," Ted said seriously, and reaching into his pocket, brought out a fist full of bullets. "Here, Sheriff. I slipped these out of your gun last night."

Sheriff Phil Strong felt his face turn red, from the chill morning wind, naturally.

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The violence of the shots tore the room apart

THE GLORY HUNTER

by CARL GULDAGER

CLAYTON SNOW stood behind his bar and counted the house. Four ranchers nursing quiet drinks while their wives bought out the stores. Two townsmen, off work early, getting a head start on Saturday night. And the young man sitting alone at a table, a stranger.

Peaceful enough, Snow decided, and yet he wondered about the young man. Most strangers were all too eager to get acquainted. Drummers telling their stories, newcomers off the railroad talking about the land, drifters wanting to know where there was work.

But this young man had come into Snow's Hotel before noon, registered for a room, and asked for a drink. Snow had turned the desk over to Julie and

Could a famed gunfighter bury his past and live peacefully ever after?

opened up the small barroom off the lobby.

Charley Yowell, who worked around the stables when he worked, was the first to speak up. Two drinks past discretion, he said loudly to Snow, "Who's the pup?"

"Why, I'm sorry, Charley, I guess I didn't introduce you to Mr. J. W. Mardell, stopping here from Denver." Snow smiled at the stranger as an apology for Charley's manners.

The young man didn't look up from his drink.

"Well," said Charley, "he ain't hardly civil, this J. W. pup, is he?"

The four ranchers finished their drinks and headed for the door. The other townsman, young Ed Feeney, whose dad ran the store, settled back hoping for fun.

"Here, Charley," Snow said, pushing a bottle at him, "pour yourself a drink, on the house."

Charley, torn between his greed and his fun, hesitated only a moment before grabbing the bottle, as Snow had known he would.

Painfully, Snow walked around the bar. His leg bothered him, standing that long. He went over to the stranger's table.

"Sorry, Mr. Mardell," he said, "but you know how the boys are. Would you like to see your room?"

The young man looked up at him and Snow's heart sank at the calmness and the coldness of his eyes.

"Look, old man," the stranger said, "don't fuss over me."

Charley Yowell had finished his free drink. He came over to the table.

"Say, Clayt," he said, "let's me and you join the pup and find out what makes him jump. Ed," he called, "bring that bottle over here."

"Now just a minute, Charley," Snow said. "You know I don't allow horsing around in here."

"Old man," the stranger said softly, "how'd you gimp up that leg?"

Snow felt the blood come to his face. "Why," he said, "a horse fell on me."

"I bet you were hell for fighting before you got crippled up," the young man said.

"Once I saw him take on four wild Irishers from the railroad. Whipped 'em all together."

The young man moved so fast Snow barely saw him slash Charley Yowell with one hand, catch him with the other, and hit him again, flush in the face. Then he dropped him on the floor.

Feeney stood rooted with the bottle.

"You," said the young man, "take him out of here." Feeney did.

"Fighting is fun, fist fighting," the young man said, sitting down. "But gun killing is the best. I've shot ten."

And then Snow knew who the young man was. The name still meant nothing. But Snow knew Mardell now for what he was, a glory hunter.

"Tell me, old man," Mardell said, "how many men did you kill?"

Snow sat down. "I never kept track," he said wearily. "I never picked a gun fight in my life."

"Not counting Indians," Mardell said softly.

Snow sighed. "Six," he said.

"When did that horse fall on you?"

"I was about thirty," Snow said, searching in his mind. "Hung up my guns before that, though."

Mardell laughed. "You ain't a very good liar, old man," he said. "Too bad. I bet you could have shot up at least six more."

"You got me wrong, son," Snow said. "I wasn't a gunslinger. No glory hunter, neither."

"Hell, I bet you was fast as a jackrabbit," Mardell said. "Too bad that horse crippled you up. I'd fight you now, even if you are an old man. But not with that gimpy leg."

Snow smiled. "Thank you very much, son," he said. "That's real considerate of you."

"Don't laugh at me, old man," Mardell said. "I'll rack you up like I did that loudmouth, gimp or not."

For the first time, Snow felt fear tug-

ging at his stomach. Only partly for himself, he thought.

"What time does Dan Farley usually get to town?" Mardell downed his drink.

"I don't know," Snow said.

Mardell laughed. "I think maybe you're the world's champion bad liar, old man. Get me another drink."

THE time it took Snow to get another glass he spent sorting through his mind all the ways he could head Dan off. But he knew, even as he went over them, it was a waste.

He cursed himself for not spotting Mardell the minute he saw him. A slender, nondescript man, quiet, dressed like any other man, carrying only one nondescript gun, carelessly, not too much interested in anything, not one to stand out in a crowd. A killer, a glory hunter.

"Listen to me, old man," Mardell said. "I know Dan Farley like he was a school book. Never seen him, but I'd recognize him sooner than my own mother.

"I know where he carries his gun. I know how he moves with it. I can tell you every man he killed, when and how and why. I know he's got a spread out on the South Fork. I know he's after your daughter to marry him.

"He comes to town about two every Saturday, rides a buckskin, and has that Indian with him. Comes right here to Snow's Hotel to sleep in for the night, has dinner with you and your girl, then chins with you until bed.

"He takes your daughter to church on Sunday, has dinner with you again, and goes back to his spread, him and that Indian."

Snow sat down. Finally he said, "All right, you know him like a book. You know he ain't had a gun fight in two, three years now."

"He'll fight me," Mardell said. "He's not the kind of a man to back down. And I'll brace him. I'm younger, smarter, faster than he is now."

Mardell raised his glass. "To the man who finally got Dan Farley," he said.

"You know, old man, this will make a big man of me. They'll be talking all the way down to Santa Fé. Next time I come to town, there won't be nobody who don't know J. W. Mardell."

It's a kind of sickness, Snow thought. You've seen it before. Why are you so sacred now? Because, he told himself, you're old and no old man comes upon walking death, bragging and grinning death, without fear sitting upon him.

"Look, son," he said, "there are a couple of things you don't know. Dan Farley is after my daughter, like you said, but she won't marry him as long as he's gunning.

"He's working his ranch real steady now. Besides, like you said, there's younger, faster, smarter guns now. Dan knows that."

Snow shook his head. "Of course, he was a wild young one. He killed his share. But he's quit now."

Mardell said, "Why aren't you a lawyer instead of a saloon keeper?"

"I'm not trying to talk you out of it," Snow said.

"Sure you ain't," Mardell said. "Tell me some more."

"One thing more," Snow said. "You saw my girl, Julie. Everything in the world to me. I'd like to see her married and settled down.

"You fight Dan. You win and she's practically a widow. You lose, everybody knows Dan is gunning again, and there'll be another glory hunter here before the first snow falls."

"Old man, you touch my heart. Dan Farley should of thought of that ten years ago and a dozen dead men before now. You know," Mardell said, "it's getting tougher all the time. Everybody settling down, hanging up their guns. Getting so there's nobody you can shoot anymore who means anything. Take that loudmouth who jumped me. Shooting him would be an insult.

"Nope." He shook his head. "I've just got to do it, old man. There ain't many more left like Dan Farley and I'm going to gun him."

He thought a while. "One thing more. I don't understand about the Indian."

"He's a Shoshone," Snow said. "Dan saved his life last winter. He was hunting strays after a storm and found this Indian snow-blinded. Took him in and now the Indian won't go away. Says he can't leave until he pays Dan back for saving his life."

"Now that's a real heart-warming story." Mardell grinned. "You're full of 'em, old man. That Indian don't know how close he is to being free again."

"You like my stories?" Snow was getting desperate. "I'll tell you a real dandy. My name ain't Snow, it's Clayton Pardee and in my time I rode Pony Express, buffalo hunted, was a scout for the Army, sheriff of Dodge City, and killed forty-two men. Not counting Indians.

"But somewheres I lost my stomach for killing and married my girl from Missouri, changed my name and came out here to Wyoming Territory. Had me a spread up in the foothills of the Absarokas when there wasn't a white man, or a glory hunter, within five hundred miles. I lost my wife when I got my little girl. Then that horse threw me. I started this town. Built the hotel when the railroad came. You heard of Clayt Pardee, son?"

"For a man who ain't no liar at all, you sure can give it a try," Mardell said. "I heard of Clayt Pardee. I've seen his grave down at Dodge."

"Lying in that grave is some poor nameless drifter, dead from drink. I know," said Snow, "I put him in there and put my name on the stone."

"Now, old man," Mardell said, "you're out of your head. I ain't going to shoot you up and go away. They'd laugh me back to St. Louis. You can't kill a man as dead as Clayt Pardee."

SNOW smiled. He felt very old and very tired. "You're right," he said to Mardell. "Clayt Pardee's been dead a long time. But it was a good story, wasn't it?"

"Like you said, a real dandy." Mardell pulled out a watch. "You got five minutes more, old man. You want to tell me now how you're really Colonel Cody?"

"Nope," said Snow. "I'm no trick-shooting circus man, son. Just an old saloon keeper trying to keep his girl from becoming a widow before she's married."

"Get your girl in here, old man," Mardell said.

"Son," Snow said, "you talk like that and you're not going to live to get at Dan Farley."

Even as he spoke, Snow knew it was a mistake. Mardell hit him twice so fast it felt like one blow. Snow's head split with pain and he tasted blood at the corner of his mouth.

"Old man," Mardell's voice was whisper soft, "we've used up all the time for talking. Do like I say."

Snow wiped at his mouth and called the girl. Tall, with blonde hair glinting with silver like the sun on sagebrush, she stood in the doorway. "Yes, Dad?"

"You Dan Farley's girl?" Mardell asked.

"He thinks so," the girl said.

Mardell put his gun on the table. "You stand there where I can watch you," he said. "I don't want you scaring him off. When he comes into the lobby, you walk in here with your father and me."

"What is it, Dad?" the girl's voice was steady.

"This man wants to see Dan," Snow said. "We'll do as he says."

"There's a crowd outside," the girl said.

Mardell laughed. "I'll bet."

"Well," said Snow, "we had a little ruckus in here a while back. I guess they're waiting to see what happens next."

"Charley Yowell was sick in the horse trough and Ed Feeney's gone after the sheriff," the girl was uncertain now.

Mardell laughed again. "Nobody will come in here until it's all over," he said. "Nobody, that is, except Dan Farley."

The girl gave a little cry.

"It's all right, Julie," Snow said. "He's just another crazy glory hunter. Dan will quiet him down." Mardell was right, he thought, I'm no liar at all. I say something like that and it rings like a lead dollar.

There was a noise in the street outside, the sound of many voices raised all at once, Charley Yowell's above the others.

Mardell put his gun back.

Dan Farley was six-foot-three, thin as a whip, black-haired, big-handed. He stood in the doorway from the lobby, his eyes at once on Mardell. The Indian, standing as tall, face like a slab of sun-reddened rock, eyes flicking from one to another, was at his shoulder.

"Now if everybody will move nice and quiet into the bar, off to one side, Mr. Farley and I will do our business and get it over," Mardell didn't move from his chair.

"Julie, you and your Dad get behind the bar," Dan's voice was cold. Snow thought, he could just as well be talking to his horse, but he moved.

Farley moved into the room. The Indian circled behind him.

"Get up," Farley said to the stranger at the table. "It's your move, mister. But don't bust no mirrors or the old man will finish us both."

Mardell laughed. "Some old man." He got up slowly. "Wish I had time to talk with you some, Mr. Farley."

Snow didn't see what happened then too clearly and it wasn't until after the shooting—with Mardell blasted back against the wall and falling over on his face, the Indian dead on the floor with Farley's gun in his hand, and Dan himself, on one knee, cursing—that he could comprehend it.

The violence of the shots had torn the room apart and it was only when it was quiet again that the pieces of what had happened fell together into place.

The Indian had moved in behind Dan and grabbed his gun, shoving Dan to one side. Mardell, startled, had been hit first, but before he went down he had killed the Shoshone.

But it took Snow only a minute. And then he knew what he had to do. He dragged over to the door and locked it. When he spoke, his voice was flatter, harder, colder than Mardell's or Farley's had ever been.

"I'm going to keep that crowd out of here," he told his daughter and Dan Farley. "We've seen the last of the glory hunters. You," he said, jabbing a finger at Julie, "are going to be overcome with grief." He turned on Farley. "You just got yourself killed, shooting down that man, son. Somewhere in all the ruckus, the Indian just slipped away, back to his people."

As the girl and the man stared at him, Snow jerked his head impatiently. "Both of you get upstairs and stay out of sight. This is the only way I know to put an end to the gunning. I'll get that Indian in a sack and he's going to be buried with your name on him, Dan. Now get out of here so I can manage this."

And he managed it, as he told the two of them late that night, upstairs, in the back of the hotel.

"It was easy," Snow said. "I told Will Feeney you was too shot up around the head to be looked at. He nailed that Indian into the box while I watched, never looked in the sack, never said a word, except how sorry he was for both of us, Julie.

"Son," he told Dan Farley, "you ride out tonight. Go over the mountans to California and start you a new life there."

Snow felt almost young again, full of hope, sure of himself.

"You change your name," he told Dan Farley. "Make it something short and simple, like Forest or Frost. Then, after a while, when Julie and I can't stand our painful memories, here no longer, we'll move on West.

"It won't be long, son," Snow said, and he was smiling now, as though enjoying some great and private joke. And you are, he thought.

"We'll join with you soon, boy." Clayton Snow smiled.

He found the two young people looking at him as though at a stranger. "Don't stare at me like that," Clayton Snow said. "A fellow my age has to be prepared to take desperate steps to see that first grandchild before going to his glory."

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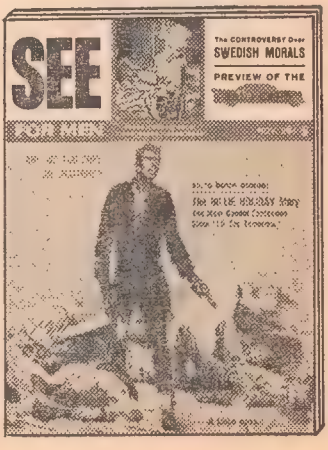

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The Better Man

By BARRY CORD

They were both fighters—the young, hard-working ramrod and the older, soft-spoken drifter—and both would have died for Polly Stallings

I

DAVE CARLING rode a tired dun mare back to the 20 S ranch with a long-held anger fraying his temper. With the bitter knowledge that he had let things go too long and already it might be too late.

He rode into the ranch yard with the shadows of a dying day stretching long behind him and it was a familiar scent gone sour. He saw Roy Stallings, boss of 20 S, enjoying his evening cigar on the veranda, and further on the tall graceful figure of a man bending over a girl on a swing hammock.

The man did not turn as he rode past, but Roy Stallings nodded to him and Polly Stallings, the girl in the hammock, turned to look at him.

She had been laughing softly at something the man bending over her had said—there was the lilt of that laughter in her voice as she called out to him.

"Dave!"

He rode by, not looking back, as though he had not heard. His anger was a mounting, a violent surge barely kept in check. He pulled up by the corral and for a moment he remained in saddle, a big, hard-muscled man who at twenty-four still looked like a boy. He had a square, sandy-stubbled face with a deep cleft chin and an easy way of looking at people and no one in the Big Salt country could remember Dave Carling being mad at anything.

Dave had started working for the 20 S as a boy; he had been its ramrod for the past two years. He was not a hard man and he didn't run his crew with a hard fist. He did his share of the work willingly, and sometimes more than his share, and his men respected him for that and worked harder because of it. Most men, that is. The few drifters who came to sit out a winter usually didn't last long.

Dave was an orphan when he came to work for Stallings, and he found a home on the 20 S. He had found Polly Stallings, too.

A job he liked, and a girl he loved—that was the way things stood when Kansas Kelly came along. At least that was the name the newcomer had given, and it was the name on the 20 S payroll.

Kelly a tall, slender, graceful man was at least six years older than Dave. A grave-faced man with gray, direct eyes, a small, brown mustache, a seldom-seen smile. A soft-spoken man, and a handsome man, Dave admitted.

He had had no premonition of trouble the day Kansas rode into the 20 S ranchyard. The man looked tired and beat and he had eyed Dave somberly.

Dave had just come out of the bunkhouse and Kansas, still in saddle, said:

"Nice looking spread. Do you need a hand?"

Davd had shrugged. "Stay for supper," he invited. "You can ask the old man, his name's Roy Stallings." He held out his hand. "I'm Dave Carling."

The drifter had hesitated a small moment. "Kansas," he had said slowly. "Kelly. They go together."

He had dismounted and looked after his weary animal first. Then he had washed, taken his place at the supper table in the galley and when the meal was over he gave cookie a hand with the dishes. By that time Roy Stallings had come out to his favorite chair on the veranda for his smoke and Kansas asked him for a job.

He stood tall and slim and he wasn't wearing a gun. There was an oiled Winchester in his saddle boot, but if he owned a Colt he was keeping it in his saddle bag.

Roy had looked at Dave, who was eyeing Polly who had come out to the porch and was smiling at the new man, swallowed the faint prod of jealousy and said: "We can use a good man, Roy."

He had come to regret this in the months which followed.

For Kansas was the kind of man who took over wherever he went. He was a top-hand and he was smart. And he knew how to handle men. He gave an order and the men obeyed before they stopped to question it.

In the three months Kansas had been with the 20 S, Dave admitted grimly, the man had taken over with Polly and was in fair way of taking over as ramrod.

It's come this far, he thought savagely, I've got to get it settled tonight!

He unsaddled and turned his horse into the corral and went on into the bunkhouse, pulling off his coat and shirt as he walked to his bunk. Charley Slovak was oiling his rifle. He looked up at Dave, but when Dave didn't meet his glance he looked across to Mort Elvers, a wizened oldster who had been with 20 S since its beginning. Mort was washing a cotton shirt, dunking it in a bucket of soapy water.

Mort glanced at Dave and frowned. He liked Carling and he was blunt in his talk. "Damned nuisance," he muttered loudly. "Always hangin' around Roy's gal."

Dave heard the old man's words, but he kept a grip on his anger. He ran his palm across his stubbled jaw and decided there wasn't enough light left to shave

by. He grabbed a towel and went out to the wash bench and while he was drying his face he heard Kansas come toward the bunkhouse.

He waited, his shoulders loosening. Kansas came by, paused, eyed him with bleak curiosity, then went inside. Dave bunched his towel in his fist and followed.

On the veranda Roy Stallings caught that gesture and cursed sharply. He had been expecting this.

KANSAS'S bunk was at the far end of the long narrow building. He was a tidy man. He kept his rifle on the wall by his bunk. A small mirror on a shelf he had made himself. His bunk was never unmade, never messy.

Dave came in lifted his glance to the man, and kept walking. He was bare chested and the heavy muscles of his arms and shoulders were high-lighted in the pale flush of the sun's afterglow coming in through the windows.

Mort looked up as Carling passed; he started to say something and thought better of it. Charley turned around, his blue eyes growing wide with impending excitement.

Kansas turned. He sensed trouble before Dave covered the rest of the space between them. He went alert, a small troubled look darkening his gaze.

Dave came around his bunk, trapping Kansas between the wall and the bed. He wasted no words in preamble.

"I gave you an order this morning," he said. His voice was thick, congealed by the effort of holding back the urge to smash that cold and watchful face. "I sent you out with a bale of wire, staples, pliers and hammer. I found the bale by the bogs. Less than half the job done."

Kansas waited, his face whitening slowly.

"It's not been the first time," Dave snarled. "Last week I sent you to check for strays in the breaks—"

Kansas made a short, cutting gesture with his hand. "Now wait a minute, son."

It was the son that triggered Dave's pent-up anger. He lunged for Kansas, his right smashing into the tall man's face, splitting the skin under Kansas's right eye. Kansas hit the wall with his shoulders and bounced back. Dave crowded him. He dug his left into Kansas's stomach and his wide shoulders were behind the right he hooked for Kansas's chin.

Hurt and bewildered, the taller man still retained an instinctive composure. He rolled and ducked and Dave's fist slid past his ear, cracking against the boards behind him.

The shock of that impact sent pain knifing to Dave's shoulder.

Kansas's lips were drawn against his even teeth. He lifted his foot to Dave's stomach and when Dave grunted and doubled, he jammed both palms into Dave's face. Dave stumbled backward and Kansas whirled, grabbing his rifle from the wall.

"Hold it, Kansas!"

Kansas faced Dave, his rifle muzzling the 20 S foreman. There was a thin streak of blood on his cheek, murder in his flat gray eyes. He didn't glance toward the voice which had stopped him. But he seemed to catch hold of himself; he sighed softly.

His voice was a ragged whisper carrying no further than Dave's ears. "Don't ever try that again! Don't ever lay a hand on me again, fellow!"

Footsteps made their intrusion into the stretching silence. Dave turned his head. Roy was walking toward them. He was holding his Navy Colt in his hand and there was a harshness around his mouth.

Behind him, in the bunkhouse doorway, Polly appeared. She took a long look at the scene and her hand went up to her mouth.

"Put that rifle away, Kansas!" Roy's voice was curt. "There'll be no gunplay between men working for me."

Kansas obeyed. The fight was suddenly gone from the man. But Dave was still breathing hard, his anger pushing him.

"I didn't get an explanation, Kansas!" he snarled. "I'm waiting to hear."

Roy pushed between them. "Who start-

ed this?" he growled.

Kansas said nothing.

"I did!" Dave's voice was roughly impatient. "I should have started this a long time ago, Roy. I intend to finish it tonight!"

Polly came toward them. She pushed past her father, glared at Dave, and went to Kansas. "Your face," she said. "It's cut. Come to the house. I'll fix it for you, Kansas."

Dave stiffened. "Polly," he muttered.

But she pushed him aside, and Kansas, smiling faintly, followed her. Dave turned. He looked after them, his face showing his hurt and bwilderment. Mort's glance met his, then slid away. The old man seemed embarrassed. Charley Slovak shuffled uncomfortably, avoiding Dave's gaze.

A hurt resentment choked Carling. He turned on Stallings, his voice thick, wild. "All right, Roy. Get yourself a new foreman."

"Shut up, you damn fool!" Stallings snapped. He remembered the Colt in his fist then shoved it under his waistband.

"If you're going to quit, come into the office! I'll give you your time now!"

Dave stared at him. The blood went out of his face and his eyes were wide, unguarded, unprepared for this latest shock to his pride. He had blurted out his threat to quit out of helpless anger; he had not expected Stallings to take him up on it.

Roy was already walking toward the door. Dave took a deep breath and followed.

II

STALLINGS'S office was in the back of the big ranchhouse, a small cubbyhole of a room where he wrestled with his books and bills. It held a battered rolltop desk, a kerosene lamp with a green glass shade, and a horsehair sofa whereon he rested between bouts with tally figures and twinges of rheumatism.

At fifty-odd, Stallings was still an active man who liked to ride, not sit on his veranda, and he hated books and the necessary book work that went with running a big cattle ranch.

He closed the door behind Dave and walked to his desk. He took a half-filled bottle of whisky from a lower drawer, two glasses, and poured generously. He handed one to Dave.

A smothering rage clogged Dave's throat. "To hell with the drink, Roy! I'll take my money and leave—"

"You'll sit down and listen to me!" the older man said impatiently. He shoved the glass into Dave's hand. "It'll take the sting out of that right fist. Drink it!"

Dave's bitter gaze held the older man's eyes. He saw no censure there, only an impatience curbed by understanding. He took the whisky and downed it.

"I'm not quitting," he said. "You'll have to fire me, Roy."

Stallings's gray eyes crinkled and he swore softly. "I am," he said bluntly. "For the record. You'll draw your time and when you leave here you'll hate the 20 S and you'll tell everybody so!"

Dave's eyes clouded. "You're firing me?" he asked thickly.

Stallings put a hand on Dave's shoulder and shoved him back into the chair. His voice lowered.

"I've seen it building up between you and Kansas, Dave. It had to come, sooner or later. I'm glad it happened now."

Dave shook his head slowly, not following the rancher. He looked down at his battered knuckles and gently massaged them with his left hand.

"You could have told me sooner," he muttered. "Kansas is a good hand. But I think you're making a mistake. I don't trust him."

"Neither do I!" Stallings snapped. "Have you thought about it? We've been losing beef for almost a year. Even before Kansas joined us. A few head at a time. But the rustling has been getting out of hand. We're losing bigger bunches. You know this, Dave. And you and I know that the rustlers always seem to know where to work." Stallings made an impatient gesture. "It's reached the point

where I pull all my cows in on the home range or I hire another half dozen riders. You know I can't do either."

Dave licked his lips. "I thought—"

"What happened tonight?" Stallings interrupted bluntly. "What brought things to a head between you and Kansas? Was it because of Polly?"

"It didn't help," Dave admitted. "I sent Kansas out to repair fence around the bogs. I rode out that way this afternoon. The wire was there; he had barely gotten started. He had left it like that." Dave's lips tightened. "It wasn't the first time he's disobeyed orders and gone out on something on his own."

"Why didn't you fire him?"

Dave flushed.

Stallings sighed. "You're a young fool. You didn't want Polly to think she was the cause of it?"

Dave said nothing.

"I didn't watch you for eight years for nothing," Stallings said gently. "I didn't make you my foreman on a whim, or because Polly liked you. I like you, Dave. I'm on your side. Even with Polly. But she makes up her own mind when it comes to choosing a man."

Dave reddened. "I never asked you—"

The cattleman poured again, handed Dave's drink to him. "Maybe you've been too sure of yourself," he muttered cynically. He made a quick guesture. "Polly's your worry, Dave. Mine's the rustling. What happened just now gave me the opening I wanted."

He waited while Dave finished his drink. He saw the blood darken Dave's neck, and he smiled at the edgy puzzlement in the ramrod's eyes. He wanted Dave this way—a little hurt, sore, puzzled. Sometimes Dave was too easy-going. He had not worked too hard for what he had attained here, and he had been too sure of Polly.

"You'll draw your time and leave here. Tomorrow'll be soon enough. You'll head south, for Benton Wells, then cut back for Rimrock. In one place or the other you'll run into a lead. I'm sure of it. I'll see that the boys spread the news of what happened here in town."

Dave shook his head. "Put it on the line, Roy! Either I'm fired, or—"

"You'll be earning your pay for a change!" the cattleman snapped. "If Kansas is in with the rustlers, you'll have a chance to find out. Don't go off half-cocked. Find out who's doing the rustling, where they have been taking my beef. Don't play hero. Slip back here when you find out and we'll get Deputy Sheriff Wheeler and ride in on them."

Dave stood up. "And Polly?"

"That's your problem, Dave." Stallings's tone took on a kindlier edge. "I'll tell her the truth—later."

Dave took a deep breath. "I'll draw my time now," he said loudly. In the sudden stillness that followed, muted by the walls between them, he heard Polly's laughter from somewhere in the big house, followed by the undecipherable murmur of Kansas's voice.

His right hand clenched and the swollen knuckles went white as he waited for Stallings to write out a bank draft for him.

THE morning dawned gray and bitter and the snow on the high peaks was visibly lower. The chill was on the land, and soon it would snow across the valley of the Big Salt.

Roy Stallings, pulling his suspenders over his gray wollen shirt, felt a shiver. He was getting old when he hated winter. There had been a time when he had ridden line in the dead of winter, come back bone-tired and still looked forward to the eight mile ride to town for the Saturday night dance.

Behind him he heard his daughter come into the kitchen and pause by the window. He knew she was looking across the yard to the bunkhouse where Dave Carling was saddling his bay horse. Roy liked Dave, and now he wondered if he had done the right thing. Dave was bitter and he could be hurt—he had never been tested against the gun breed.

Polly's small voice pulled him toward her. "Dad! He's leaving! You did fire

him last night! Why?"

He looked at her, noticing again how much she looked like her mother did twenty-two years ago. Peggy Stallings had been a town girl, a gay and pretty woman, yet she had taken the drudgery of their early years together without complaining, without losing her gaiety. Sometimes, he thought morosely, Fate plays the wrong hand. She should be alive today, to share if not the luxury, at least the peace and security he had attained.

Polly came closer, repeating her question. He shrugged. "It was coming to a head," he said shortly. "It had to be either Dave or Kansas—and neither man is the kind to play second fiddle to the other."

Polly colored at the implication. "Dave's a fool!" she said, seeking refuge in her own woman's logic. "Just because Kansas is polite and a gentleman, he resents him."

Stallings turned away, not wanting to involve himself in her problem. Dave and Polly needed a lesson—and he was not altogether sure it would work out as he wished. Dave was stubborn, and he knew his daughter.

Outside Dave Carling drew the cinches tight on the bay, checked the latigo straps and swung aboard. He didn't look at the house. There was a sickening emptiness in him. This had been home for more than eight years. He had been happy here.

Then he recalled Kansas's cold face and the warning in the man's slate gray eyes—and Polly's condemnation as she had taken Kansas's side. He did not understand, nor, he thought grimly, would he ever understand women.

Roy was on his side—but Roy was thinking about his cows, not Dave's troubles. He could have told his daughter what he suspected about Kansas, and it would have helped explain Dave's feelings about the man. At least, he admitted honestly, part of the reasons for his feelings against Kansas. But Roy's prime concern was his cows.

Earn your money for a change, son!

What the hell did Roy think he had been doing all these years? Well, to the devil with Roy Stallings, too, he thought bitterly. Why risk my neck to find out who's rustling his beef now?

But he felt sick as he swung his bay down the poplar-lined road away from the ranch.

He rode slowly, a big man stiff in saddle, occupied with his own bitter, self-pitying thoughts. He was several miles on the road to Benton Wells when he heard the rider coming up fast behind him.

He pulled aside, neck-reining his animal to a stop, and eyed the hurrying rider. A quick light of anticipation burned in his gaze as he recognized Polly Stallings. Then anger blew out the welcoming light and his gaze was cool and noncommittal when she pulled up alongside him.

"Dave!" Her voice had a breathless quality. She searched his face, her own manner defensive. "You left without saying goodbye!"

She wanted to say more, but the coldness in his eyes stopped her. He stood there, not making a move, and his lack of warmth chilled her; She felt her own impatience turn to anger.

"I didn't want to disturb you," he answered stiffly.

"Where are you going?"

He made a small motion. "South," he said, deciding this only at this moment. "Where it's warmer—and friendlier!" He added this, too, with a touch of bitterness.

She bit her lips. "You don't have to go, Dave!" she said quickly. "Dad didn't think you'd take him seriously. I'm sure he didn't mean to fire you."

"He's got Kansas!" Dave said bluntly. "Both you and your father seem to have decided he was the man to take my place!"

She pulled back from him, temper rising in her. Her eyes flashed. "If that's all you care, Dave, if you quit this easily, I—"

"I was fired, remember?" Dave jabbed mercilessly.

"Good riddance!" she flung at him. She

turned her mount quickly, not wanting him to see the tears welling up in her. Her back was stiff and proud as she rode away from him.

He watched her go, feeling a depression settle over him. He knew he had said the wrong things, and he didn't know why. . . .

III

BENTON WELLS was a solid cluster of clapboard houses and false-fronted stores with a scattering of stone and brick buildings leading an air of settled permanence to the town.

Dave remained in Benton Wells the better part of a week, spending time in the several saloons. He did all his drinking the first night and got it over with—he spent the rest of the stay in town getting over a big head.

He found that news of his firing had spread through Benton Wells by the second day. Most people he knew were sympathetic. He was offered several jobs which he refused. Even Deputy Sheriff Wheeler shook his head and opined that Roy Stallings must be getting downright senile.

By afternoon of the fifth day Dave's bitterness had settled to a cold, tight knot inside him and he was beginning to remember Roy's orders. Roy trusted him. He couldn't let the old man down.

He left Benton Wells, ostensibly heading south. A half dozen miles out of town he left the road and circled toward the far hills. He rode at a hard clip, judging the ominous sky over the Cullen Range. If the rustlers were planning a big haul of 20 S beef, they would try it before the first big snow.

Dave made Rimrock, a ramshackle settlement in the foothills, just before dark.

Few people knew the reason for Rimrock's existence, although guarded tongues opined that the few inhabitants seemed to be of the vagrant breed, easy on the move. The town was on no beaten trail, although the back hills were perfect for a quick exit if a man was so bent. It was known that occasionally sheep herders stopped by, or riders who kept a saddle on their mounts and slept in their clothes. All who came to Rimrock stopped in the YOU CALL IT—a combination hostelry, saloon and general store. The YOU CALL IT was owned and run by Big Al Moseby, and it was considered that he owned the rest of the ramshackle hill town, too. The few families who tenanted the shacks flanking the YOU CALL IT were either relatives of Big Al's or close friends.

Dave pulled up at the rack in front of the ramshackle store and took his look at the place. The structures flanking the store seemed to shrink from the bitter wind coming through Culebra Cut, some of them were empty, others had rags stuffed in paneless windows. At the end of the narrow, short street the road dipped down to the long valley of the Culebra. Behind Dave the long bleak range of the Cullens seemed to reach north to the winter snows.

Dave ducked under the bar and went up the steps, pulling open the heavy door. He stamped inside, blowing on his gloveless hands, and headed for the big, glowing stove in the middle of the big room that held a bar against one wall, eating benches close by and a conglomeration of merchandise stacked on open shelves against the opposite wall. A narrow staircase came down by the merchandise counter.

The room was as big and as drafty as a barn, and the three men hunched over their poker game wore sheepskin coats although they were not more than fifteen feet from the stove. They put covert glances on Dave and their play was stiff while he put his back to the stove and watched them.

Big Al was just coming up a flight of stairs behind his bar. A trapdoor led down into his liquor cellar. He let the trapdoor slam and turned, his arms full of bottles. He saw Dave standing by the stove and he nodded greeting.

Big Al weighed close to three hundred pounds and while much of it ran to

paunch there was more than enough beef on him to make him a mean customer in a fight. His arms were huge and his hands thick and bony and he looked like a grizzly with his small, reddish eyes half hidden by thick graying brows. A curly peppershot beard covered most of his face—Big Al claimed the beard kept him warm in winter.

"Lose your way, Dave?" he boomed. He set the bottles up on his back shelves and turned, holding one in his fist. "Don't see you up this way often," he added cheerfully. "Buy you a drink?"

Dave walked to the bar and nodded, his face set in frowning scowl. "Better let that bottle stand, Al," he muttered. "Have a drink with me?"

Al grinned, but his eyes were lidded. "You sound unhappy, fellow. The 20 S giving you trouble these days?"

"Wouldn't know," Dave growled. He tossed his drink down and reached for the bottle. "Time I started giving the ranch some trouble myself."

Al's eyes narrowed. "Meaning?"

Dave slugged down another shot. "My business," he muttered, and filled his glass again.

Al shrugged and moved away. He stood at the end of the bar and watched Dave with quizzical appraisal, and Dave thought; *If anyone knows, who's doing the rustling, Al knows!*

He felt the liquor fan out in his stomach and he put his mind to the role he had determined to play here. He began to drink steadily, like a man soured at the world and embittered with himself. And he watched Al without seeming to, and poured some of his drinks into the spittoon when Al couldn't see.

The bottle was empty and he was banging on the counter when Al came and faced him an hour later. The big man eyed him with tolerant regard. "Don't know what's eating on you, Dave. But you'll never make it back to the ranch tonight—not with that much rotgut in you. I got a cot in my back room you can use."

"Thanks, Al," Dave said. His mouth felt stiff and his voice was blurred; he could feel his face burn as he faced the stove. His thoughts were stiff, as though he had to shape them from clay. He had slugged down more from that bottle than he had intended.

"Like to camp out here, with you," he muttered. "Until I get a stake. All right with you, Al?"

Al reached over and clapped a heavy hand on Dave's shoulder. "Sure it's okay. Hell, I heard about Roy kickin' you out, Dave." His voice held the close familiarity of an old friend. "Dirty shame, I said, when I heard about it. Kicked you out for a man who's been with 20 S less'n three months. Hell, for a galoot I wouldn't trust with an empty whisky bottle."

Dave put his palms on the counter to steady himself. "You met up with Kansas?"

"Yep. He rode up here once, about a month ago. Craggy, close mouthed bastard."

"Yeah, that's him," Dave said darkly. "I'll get even with the son—and with old man Stallings, too!"

Al's left eyelid drooped knowingly. "Reckon you got a right to be sore, son. But—"

"Accused me of not taking good care of his damn cows!" Dave butted in heedlessly. "Said he thought Kansas could do a better job. I'll take care of his cows all right. About fifty head, right through these back hills."

He closed his mouth harshly, as if his fogged mind realized what he was saying. He reached for the bottle, tilted it over his glass, and scowled at the few drops which trickled down.

Then he glanced up at Big Al and muttered, "You got any objections?"

Moseby thought about it. His face was hard to figure out behind that mass of graying whiskers, but his mouth had a thoughtful droop. "Maybe" he mumbled, and moved away as the front door opened.

MORT ELVERS came inside, carefully closing the heavy door. He looked like some scarecrow bundled in an old

mackinaw. His bandana was tied over his ears, the knot under his hat. He looked around the room and started when he saw Dave. He put out his hands at the stove as he walked by, blew on his fingers, and came to the bar beside Dave.

"Glad to see you, Dave. Didn't expect to find you up here, though."

Dave said thickly, "Have a drink, Mort."

He banged the empty bottle on the bar top and wondered what had brought the small 20 S puncher up here. It was a good five hour ride from the ranch.

Mort rubbed his hands together. He hadn't shaved for several days and he looked tired.

He said, "I guess I'm about ready to quit myself, Dave. After the way Stallings treated you," he shook his head. "Aw, hell—I guess I can't take any more of Kansas, either."

But Al came up, sliding a new bottle on the bar. He put a glass in front of Mort and said pleasantly; "Looks like the Twenty S is all at my place tonight. Always glad to see you boys. One on the house, Mort?"

Mort nodded nervously. "I think I'm through at the ranch, Al. I been wantin' to quit a long time. And after what Roy did to Dave I feel I've had all I can stomach. I rode over to see you about that piece of land your brother-in-law has down in the valley."

Big Al nodded. "I'll talk to Bazey about it, Mort."

Dave poured out drinks all around. He was lifting his when he saw the two men come down the narrow staircase from upstairs rooms. Even through the haze which blurred his vision he noticed that they were hard men, strangers to the Big Salt country. One was tall, leaned down almost to gauntness, about thirty. He wore a pressed town suit and the tip of a leather holster showed under the long skirt of his coat. The other was older, heavy-shouldered, and wore range clothes and a straggly roan mustache.

They hesitated briefly at the foot of the staircase and glanced at the men.

Dave turned on his elbow and waved to them. "I'm buying!" he said thickly.

They came up and Big Al introduced them. Cal Mesquite was the tall, gaunt man in the gray suit. Rick Weston was the older, heavy set man.

"Cal's a cattle buyer from up north," Big Al explained, and Dave wondered what a cattle buyer was doing in Big Al's place.

Mort seemed very nervous. He spilled his first drink and seemed uninterested when Dave poured him another. The two strangers had their drink, and Cal put money on the bar.

"Have a couple on us, Dave," Cal said. His tone was friendly. "Rick and I have to see about some food supplies we want to take along in the morning." He smiled easily, put a hand on Dave's shoulder in warm friendliness, and headed for the kitchen with Weston.

The front door opened again. A slatternly dressed man with a lantern jaw came in. He started for the bar, paused, and tugged at his long thin nose in alarm. He repeated the guesture; then seemed to change his mind about having a drink and went to warm his backside at the stove.

But Al said, "I think I know what you want, Mort. Come into the kitchen while I send Belinda to fetch Bazey."

Mort nodded vigorously. "Want to settle this now, Al." He downed his drink and moved away from the bar. Big Al plunked the bottle squarely in front of Dave. "On the house," he said with heavy humor.

Dave played the part. The liquor he had consumed was having its effect, and his legs felt disjointed and not part of his body. But he knew what he was doing. He felt a chill wind on his back again and turned slowly, bracing himself against the counter.

The YOU CALL IT was being overrun tonight, he thought fuzzily—overrun with 20 S men! He shook his head to clear it.

Kansas kicked the door shut and paused for a brief moment. His face mirrored a quick surprise when he saw Dave.

Then he walked up to the stove, warmed his hands. His gun was strapped to his right thigh; he looked tall, cool and dangerous.

"Hello," he nodded. Dave could see the guarded question in the new 20 S ramrod's eyes. A lot of things were coming to a head here tonight. The two "cattle buyers" in the kitchen—Kansas showing up—what else did he need?

Kansas walked to the bar. "Thought I saw Mort ride up this way," he said. His voice held neither friendliness nor anger.

Dave scowled. "Could be you need glasses," he growled. He knew Kansas was using Mort's presence here as an excuse—a cover for his evident appointment with Cal and Rick.

Big Al came out of the kitchen. He walked fast and light for such a heavy man. He wiped his hands in the towel tied around his middle. "Hello," he muttered to Kansas. His eyes were neutral, but his tone was cold.

Kansas slid a half dollar on the bar, asked for a glass, and poured a shot from Dave's bottle. "Sorry about the way things turned out at the spread, son," he said. His voice was level. "Stallings plumb surprised me when—"

Dave swung around to face him, his face dark. "He surprised me, too!" he snarled. "But you don't! And keep the son out of your talk with me, or I'll finish what I started back in the bunkhouse!"

Kansas's lips tightened. "You got a right to your opinion," he said. "I'm still looking for Mort Elvers. Seen him?"

Dave wondered why he asked. Mort's horse was outside, at the rack. Or was it? He said flatly, "Go to hell, Kansas! I wouldn't tell you the time of day!"

Big Al hastily intervened. "Mort was here. Stopped by for a drink, then left. Said he was ridin' back by way of Tumblin' River Canyon."

Kansas hesitated. He finished his drink. "Reckon Stallings had you pegged better than I did," he said coldly to Dave. "I took you for a big kid who still had to get his feet wet. But a clean kid. Hell, looks like you need somebody to keep your nose clean, too!"

He turned and walked out with long quick strides. Dave lurched away from the bar, after him. He got as far as the window overlooking the sagging porch. And he saw what he wanted to.

He saw Kansas mount in the spill of lamplight across the rack . . . saw him pull his bay away and ride into the night. There was only one other animal nosing that rack. *His own!*

A thin suspicion glinted in his eyes. He heard Big Al come up behind him and he swore viciously, riding out the role he was playing. "Damn him! Next time I'll kill him."

He stumbled and the whisky churned up in him and he suddenly felt lightheaded. Big Al's arm held him up.

"Reckon you need to sleep it off, Dave." Al's voice sounded fatherly. "There's that cot in my back room."

Dave made a noise of protest. But he was led into the kitchen and past a tired, bent woman puttering around a huge cast iron stove. He remembered vaguely that Mort Elvers and the two phoney cattle buyers were supposed to be in here and he didn't see them. Al led him to a door in the kitchen which opened to a small storeroom. There was a cot with two or three old army blankets against the stocked shelves.

Dave fell on the cot. The last thing he remembered was Big Al drawing the blankets over him.

IV

VOICES awakened him some time later. He wasn't sure how long he'd been asleep. He thought he heard Mort's voice, edgy and angry.

"I'm pulling out! There's close to twenty-five hundred you've got cached away for me here, Al. I want it."

The voices faded away. Dave came to his feet. It was pitch dark in the storeroom. A thin line of light seeped under the door. He scrubbed his jaw stubble. His mouth felt like cotton swabbed in

iodine. There was a dull pain over his eyes.

What in hell was Mort Elvers still doing here?

The murmur of voices drifted away. Dave walked to the door, opened it. The kitchen was empty. There was the smell of freshly brewed coffee in the stale air. He walked to the cupboard, took down a mug, and poured coffee into it from the big pot on the stove. He stood by the hot range, sipping it.

He heard the outside door close and footsteps came across the empty barroom. He could tell the big room was empty by the echoing, hollow footfalls.

Big Al loomed up in the doorway. He seemed disconcerted at seeing Dave up. "You slept it off pretty fast," he muttered. "Seemed like you'd be out for the night."

Dave shrugged. "Can't be much of that left, Al." He grinned. "Thanks for the cot."

Big Al seemed suspicious. He said, "I got a room upstairs, if you want to stay. Nothin' fancy."

Dave frowned. "I'm not particular." He lifted his mug and joggled the coffee in it. "I been thinking," he muttered. "Those cattle buyers you go staying here, are they particular?"

Al frowned. "Meaning?"

"About brands."

Moseby got himself a mug of coffee.

"I've decided to go into the cattle business," Dave said recklessly. "I can have fifty head of prime steers for them in two days. They'll be Cross Eight brand."

Al sipped his coffee, straining it noisily through his whiskers. "Might be," he said. "I'll get Cal an' Rick."

Dave waited, his mind working to shake the cotton from it. Cal and Rick came into the kitchen behind Al. Al looked at Dave and shrugged. Dave repeated his offer.

Cal rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. His eyes held no expression. "We've been offered a better deal," he said finally. He seemed reluctant to mention it. "Five hundred head. Twenty S beef."

Dave looked up sharply. "That's a lot of cows," he muttered harshly. "Who's delivering?"

"Friend of yours," Cal said. He chuckled. "Goes by the name of Kansas Kelly down here. Rick and I knew him up north. In Kansas. Wasn't Kansas or Kelly then."

Dave said grimly; "I don't like him. I don't like Stallings, either. The old fool kicked me out because of Kansas. I'd be glad to see Stallings get a real run of bad luck!"

Cal's voice was thin. "You can take part in kicking him around if you want, kid. I don't trust Kansas Kelly. Didn't trust him up north, and I don't feel easy with him now. But he's got five hundred head for us, cheap. You want to come along and get in on it. We can use a man to help us drive them across the state line."

"Where are you meeting Kansas?"

"Place call Navajo Tanks. Know where it is?"

Dave nodded. It was on 20 S range, close to the rise of Culebra Cut. He said stubbornly, "Kansas is going to be at Navajo Tanks?"

"With five hundred head of Twenty S beef." Cal's voice was quiet, waiting.

Dave shook his head. "Roy Stalling's getting old, but not that old. After what he's been losing, five hundred head will about break him. He won't just sit back and let them go. He'll have Deputy Sheriff Wheeler and a dozen deputized men after us."

Cal shrugged. "It's a chance we'll have to take. You want in on it, Dave?"

Dave hesitated a bare moment. He couldn't back out now, not after the show he had put on. He remembered Roy's warning: *Don't play a lone hand. When you find out what we're after, come back to the ranch. We'll get Wheeler with us!*

He didn't want to play a lone hand; he had no alternative. He saw three pair of eyes on him.

He rubbed his still sore knuckles and nodded.

THEY waited, the afternoon of the next day, at Navajo Tanks. The three of them. Dave sat on his heels, smoking a limp cigarette. Cal leaned against a boulder. Rick, silent and scowling, was up by the rock bordering the trail. The wind was cold and raw and from the looks of the leaden sky Dave figured it would snow before night.

There was ice scum on the water in the limestone potholes below them. These potholes formed natural reservoirs during the dry summer months, the Navajos had been the first to use them; had given them their name.

The trail was below them, winding around a low, rock-strewn hill. Rick turned and made a sharp gesture with his hand and Cal said, "He's coming now!"

Dave dropped his cigarette. He started to rise and Weston, coming up behind him, jammed the muzzle of his Colt against Dave's spine.

Dave stiffened. He felt the man's hand reach down and draw his Colt; then the pressure against his backbone eased. He turned and looked into Cal Mesquite's sneering face.

"Why?"

Weston eased away from him; he looked down at the rider just coming into sight on the trail below.

Cal said bluntly, "You don't count, fellow. Just sit back and keep quiet!"

Dave felt baffled. He turned and waited for the rider coming up the narrow, twisting trail. He was expecting Kansas Kelly. It fitted if it was Kansas; it had to be Kansas. But how had they caught on to him?

The man who rode around the rocks into the small clearing was Mort Elvers!

He reined in sharply when he saw Dave; his lined face went slack. Cal's gun motioned him on.

He rode slowly into the clearing. Rick's voice probed harshly at Mort. "He comin'?"

Mort licked his lips. "He's comin'. About ten minutes behind."

Cal turned and nodded to Weston. The roan-mustached man went back to his cayuse tied up beyond the rocks and took his Winchester. He grinned crookedly as he came back.

Mort motioned to Dave. "What's he doing here?"

Cal Mesquite frowned. "He's going to kill Kansas Kelly, Mort. Everybody knows what happened. Dave ain't got any love for Kansas, has he? So he's going to kill Kansas. Only he's going to get careless. He's going to take a close look at the man he's ambushed—and Kansas is going to get in a lucky shot before he dies."

Mort's voice was harsh. "I don't give a hoot about Kansas, Cal. But leave Dave out of this!"

Weston whirled on the small man. "You tellin' us what to do, Mort?"

The little man's face was drawn. He didn't look at Dave. "He always gave me a fair shake, Rick," he pleaded. "I don't go in for killing."

"Well, well, Holy Joe Elvers," Cal said, sneering. "You've been rustling Twenty S beef for a year. You've made yourself a pretty little pile which you stashed away with Big Al. Now you're getting religion. To hell with you, Mort! This is the way we set it up. We get rid of that snooping town marshal, and we've got a fall guy to cover our tracks! Now get down off that cayuse and get that animal out of sight before Kansas spots you!"

Mort swung down. His face was white. He started for the hollow behind the rocks, leading his sorrel.

Weston had moved to the edge of the limestone outcrop where he could get a good look at the winding trail. The gray day limited his vision; he blew on his gloved fingers.

Cal was standing about ten feet to one side of Dave, his thumb hooked into his gun belt. Mort came back into the clearing. His voice was strained on the bleak stillness.

"Stealing a few cows is one thing, Cal. Killing a man who treated me square is another!"

Cal whirled. Mort held his Colt in his fist; his lips twitched nervously.

Weston, from further up, turned his head. Evidently both he and Cal had not counted on the old puncher turning on them. The embarrassment was deep in their faces.

Cal said bitingly: "You damn fool, Mort! Put up that gun!" He started to walk toward the old puncher, his hand sliding slowly toward his own gun.

Mort's voice jumped at him. "Hold it, Cal! I ain't—"

Weston pivoted sharply. His rifle slammed lead across the short distance to Mort, just as Dave jumped him. He was jerking the lever action for another shot when Dave's knee came up in a crunching smash against Rick's face. It lifted Weston up on his heels. Dave's hands closed over the rifle; he yanked it away from Weston and stepping back he tilted the stock in a fast uppercut that thunked solidly against Rick's jaw.

The rifle shot was still racketing in the enclosure as Dave spun around. He saw Mort sagging, holding his stomach. His Colt was still unfired. Cal was wheeling to face Dave, the muzzle of his gun leaking smoke. A spit of flame blossomed at the muzzle; Dave's rifle shot caught Cal in the stomach. He doubled over, fired another shot into the loose sand between them. Dave's second shot tipped him sidewise; he fell limply.

Dave moved to Mort. The small puncher was sitting down, his back against a rock, both hands pressed to his stomach. His eyes were watery.

Dave kneeled beside him. He tried to pull Mort's hands away from his belly so that he could see how bad the wound was. His tone was gentle. "I'll get you to the ranch," Mort."

Mort shook his head. "Won't live that long, Dave. Never meant to hurt you. Always wanted a spread of my own. Never could save the money for it, somehow. Let Big Al Moseby talk me into rustling Twenty S beef, tipping him and his gang off to Twenty S doings. Just a few head, Dave, just a few head. But Al kept wanting more. An' then that new man showed up. Kansas Kelly. Snooping son. Don't like him, Dave. But he caught on, kept following me."

Dave nodded, understanding Kansas's derelictions now. "How many cows, Mort? Where did you and Big Al run them?"

"About a thousand head, all told," Mort said. He sighed. "About two hundred still in small valley behind Rimrock. Waiting to be rebranded. Cal and Rick, with a couple of Moseby's boys, move them out. Some buyer across the state line."

Dave froze. He heard the soft scrape of a boot first and he thought Weston had regained consciousness. Then he heard Kansas's cold, level voice.

"I knew Mort was in with them, Dave. But I didn't expect to owe him my skin."

Mort's face was bitter. "Not your skin, Kansas. I wouldn't have done it, except for Dave." He sighed again and closed his eyes and his shallow breathing faded. Dave Carling came to his feet and faced the tall man who had ousted him at 20 S.

"I reckon I figured you wrong," he growled. "I thought you were the contact man." He shrugged. "It was easy to believe. I never liked you."

Kansas's voice held no warmth. "The feeling's mutual," he murmured. He walked over to Weston. "Looks like Rick'll live. But his jaw's busted." He turned and glanced at Dave. "Figured you wrong, too. You still working for Stallings?"

"Always have," Dave snapped. He jerked a thumb to Cal. "He knew you up north. Knew you enough to want to kill you and frame me for it. Who are you?"

"Doesn't matter, kid," Kansas said. "Does it?"

Dave's jaw set grimly. "No, reckon it don't." He bent over Cal and took his Colt from Cal's waistband. "I told Roy I'd find out who was doing the rustling. Now that I know, we might as well finish the job. You want in on it?"

Kansas smiled. "Might as well."

V

BIG AL MOSEBY climbed up on his bar and lighted the big overhead lamp. He moved with the deceiving grace of a shambling bear.

The same three men who had been playing the night before were at the poker table. The slatternly woman who was his wife came to the kitchen door and sniffed into a dirty handkerchief.

Riders approached the YOU CALL IT. Their hoofs rang on the hard frozen ground. The thin patter of sleet beat against the windows. Big Al smiled. Cal and Rick were back on time. He reached under the bar for the bottle of private stock and placed it on the counter.

The door opened. The man who stepped across the threshold was not Cal, nor Rick. He was a big, hard-faced man he had known as Dave Carling. Harmless Dave.

Dave said curtly: "It's all over, Al. Rick and Cal are dead. Mort, too. But Mort talked before he died!"

Al eyed the 20 S man. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. He heard movement in the kitchen, then the slatternly woman uttered a sharp sound of warning.

Al moved. He dropped down behind his bar. Dave crossed the room in a quick run; he hurdled the counter and came down almost on top of Big Al. The rustler boss was on hands and knees; he had had an old Navy Colt in his right hand. He twisted his big bulk around and fired; the concussion rocked the confined space. The bullet tore cloth and a four inch gash across Dave's ribs. Dave slammed his Colt down across Al's head.

Another .45 roared in the big room. Dave came up, his Colt held ready.

One of the poker players was slumped forward across the table; the other two had their hands high. Kansas was coming into the room through the kitchen door, pushing the staring woman ahead of him.

Dave reached down and got a fistful of Al's shirt. He tried to haul the big man around the bar, but the shirt tore in his hand. He turned to Kansas. "Reckon you'll have to give me a hand with this big jasper."

IT WAS daybreak when they rode into the 20 S with their prisoner and Mort's body. They herded Big Al and Weston and the others into the bunkhouse and a guard was set over them; a man was sent to town for the deputy sheriff.

Roy Stallings studied Dave's grim face. His ramrod seemed to have aged ten years. He looked hard. Polly, clad in a wool wrapper, her hair in two pigtails, came out to the veranda with her father.

Dave's voice was hard. "The rustling's over, Roy!"

Stallings nodded. "Come inside. Tell me about it."

Dave went inside with the old cattleman and explained what had happened. About Mort. Stallings listened in silence.

Dave glanced through the window as he talked. He could see Polly and Kansas on the veranda, standing close together.

He said flatly: "I want to get one thing straight, Roy. I'm still ramrod of this outfit?"

Stallings smiled. "You always have been, son."

Dave turned. He walked to the door, yanked it open. He walked over to Polly and Kansas. His tone was hard. "Kansas! I'm rodding Twenty S. So let's get this straight between us. When I order you to do something, I want it done, when I tell you—and my way!"

Kansas smiled with his lips. "My, My," he murmured. "You make big talk, Dave."

Dave Carling drew back to swing on him. Polly caught his arm, wedging herself between the two men. Her voice sounded frightened. "Dave! What's gotten into you?"

Dave was looking at Kansas. "Right now I want you in the bunkhouse," he snapped. "Get some grub from the galley, catch up on some sleep. I want that fence up before noon tomorrow!"

Kansas stiffened. He glanced at Stal-

lings who was standing in the doorway. The old cattleman was tamping tobacco into the bowl of his pipe; he had a neutral look on his grizzled face.

Kansas shrugged. He stepped off the veranda and headed for the galley.

Polly whirled on Dave. "What's come over you?" she repeated. "Such high-handedness—"

He reached down and cupped her chin with his forefinger. "Polly!" His voice was gentle, but firm. "I love you. You know I do. I've never kept it a secret. But since Kansas has come to work here I haven't known where I've stood with you. It's time we straighten that out. If it's Kansas you want, I want to know. I don't like him. But he's a good man."

Polly Stallings sighed. "Why didn't you tell me this before?" She smiled up at him, her lips reaching for his. "It's you I've always really wanted."

Kansas, turning at the galley door, saw them. He stood a moment in the bleak, chill morning, then he kicked the door open and went inside.

Roy Stallings chuckled. He closed the door and went back to his kitchen and settled contentedly in his old chair. . . .

It was late afternoon of the next day when Kansas rode back to the 20 S ranch yard. Dave was on the veranda with Polly. Kansas left his saddled horse waiting in front of the bunkhouse. He went inside and after a few minutes he came out and tied his warbag to the back of his saddle.

He mounted again and rode over to the ranchhouse. Roy Stallings had come out to the veranda.

Kansas's voice was polite. "Reckon I've got ten days pay coming to me, Mr. Stallings."

Roy nodded. He went back into the house. Kansas put his regard on Dave. "I got the wire up, Dave." There was a small, cool smile in his gray eyes.

Stallings came out and handed him his money. Kansas thrust it into his pocket. He touched his hat to Polly.

They watched him ride out, a tall, straight-backed figure. Stallings puffed on his pipe. Polly moved closer to Dave. "A strange man," she said softly.

"Too good a man to play second fiddle," Dave said bluntly. He looked down at Polly; she snuggled closer to him. He put his arm around her, his eyes on the dwindling figure.

Stallings turned and went back into the house. 20 S was in good hands, he thought, and reached for the coffee pot.

Coming in the Next Issue—

RENDEZVOUS AT QUITO

A THRILLING JIM HATFIELD NOVEL

By JACKSON COLE

A WAY OF DYING ***By JOE ARCHIBALD***

BOY WITH A MAN'S GUN ***By BEN FRANK***

Plus Many Other Exciting Stories and Features

Ambush At Yellowstone

a true story

by J. J. Kerttula and D. L. McDonald

THE SUMMER of 1877 brought the final decisive defeat to the great Nez Percé leader, Chief Joseph. After the battle of the Big Hole, at which they lost most of their supplies and ammunition, the Nez Percé nation, broken into small scattered bands, fled toward the Yellowstone. Hampered by the presence of their women and children, they had no real hope of escape. Slowly, group by group, they were hunted down by the Bannack scouts of General Howard's command. But it takes time to hunt down and destroy a people, especially in a wild area which for generations had been their home. And so in that summer of 1877 the newly-opened Yellowstone National Park would hardly seem an ideal vacation spot.

Nonetheless, on August 13th of that year a party of ten men set out from Helena, Montana, to explore this new recreation area. Ambitiously titled the "Weikert Expedition," and well-equipped, their purpose seems to have been a combination of prospecting this untouched country—and of upholding the pioneer's creed that "a man had a right to go where he'd a mind to," regardless of hazards. The fact they were heading into

the final mopping-up stages of a brutal Indian war seems not to have bothered them at all.

In Andy Weikert's own party was a schoolteacher named Deitrich, and five other men; Pfister, Roberts, Stewart, Kenck, and Faller. Three others—Duncan, Wilkie, and a Negro named Ben Stone—pushed on ahead to set up camp at Mammoth Springs.

The main party traveled a leisurely fifteen miles a day and arrived in camp at Mammoth on August 20th. Despite the warnings of Jim McCartney, who owned a ranch in the area, that the Park was overrun with sullen and dangerous warriors, the Weikert party pushed on next day to Tower Falls. There their *remuda* either strayed or was driven off by the Indians, and they spent several days trying to round up the strays.

On August 25th they were on the move again, enroute to Mud Springs. After fording Alum Creek they almost ran into a caravan of some three hundred Nez Percés. The white men quietly turned around and backtracked to their old camp at Tower Falls.

The next morning before breaking camp Weikert and Wilkie set out to scout the trail. They saw no sign of Indians although near Sulphur Mountain a wide new trail indicated that an even bigger band than they had sighted was somewhere in the vicinity. They decided it was too risky to continue and turned back to camp.

The morning was warm and quiet and their vigilance relaxed as they jogged single-file down the trail. Suddenly Weikert, who was in the lead, saw an Indian head pop up behind a log less than a hundred feet away. He yelled, reined his horse around hard, and drove the spurs home as he grabbed for his rifle. Momentarily the two men were standing targets as the horses came around, and Indians seemed to spring up like grass on all sides of them.

Then they were lined out on the back trail with bullets slashing the branches around them. Weikert turned in the saddle and tried a snapshot at the nearest brave, but the bullet went wide when a branch caught him behind the ear and almost tumbled him from his mount.

Being last, Weikert found the fire concentrated on him. A bullet creased his shoulder and another splintered his gun stock. Then his horse stumbled, went down to its knees, and sommersaulted. Andy Weikert was thrown clear, shaken and bruised but otherwise unhurt. He rolled over, still clutching his gun, expecting to use his dead horse for cover. To his surprise, it was struggling unhurt to its feet. Wilkie by then had reined around to cover him and the Nez Percés, seeing the two had slipped out of the ambush, melted into the underbrush. A quarter of a mile farther on, the two stopped to dress Weikert's wound and then rode on to camp.

There was no sign of their companions there. There was, in fact, practically no sign of the camp. What equipment had not been carried off was broken and strewn around, food scattered and trampled into the ground. Searching through the wreckage, they salvaged a few scraps of equipment and then started for the Springs on the assumption that any members of the party left alive would head for there. So far, they had found no bodies which indicated that all had gotten out of camp with their scalps.

A mile along the back-trail they saw a limp figure slumped across his horse and a man hobbling along on foot. It turned out to be Stewart, who had been badly wounded in the side and the calf of his right leg, and Ben Stone. From them, Weikert and Wilkie learned the details of the attack.

JUST before noon the entire party had been loafing around camp waiting word from the scouts. Suddenly from all sides there was a roar of guns and wild yells and Indians appeared from behind every tree. There was no time for defense—it was every man for himself and they scattered into the timber. Stewart and Kenck were together and drew the

pursuit of most of the braves.

They had barely gotten into the timber when Stewart went down with a bullet in his leg and another in his side. He stumbled and fell across the trail, and the Indians rushed past him in pursuit of Kenck, who fell a short distance farther on with a bullet in the back of his head. Then the warriors returned to Stewart, and as one raised his tomahawk, Stewart began to beg for his life.

"Have you any money" the brave demanded, lowering his weapon.

"Yes! Yes!" Stewart assured him, rolling over and digging through his pockets. He handed over $260 and a silver watch and the Indians drew off to one side to talk it over. After a heated argument they finally left without another glance in his direction.

After a while he began to drag himself toward the creek, where he bathed his wounds and dressed them as best he could, and presently felt somewhat revived. A noise in the timber made him crawl into cover, expecting to see the Indians returning. But it was his own saddle mare and he called and whistled to her softly. She stood looking at him for a moment, then came slowly toward him. Stewart was surprised, for she was by all odds the hardest horse in the outfit to catch, but now as if knowing something was wrong she came and stood beside him.

Grasping her by the mane he managed to work her over to where their equipment had been hung up. There was nothing left there now but a broken halter and a short piece of rope, but with these he led her to a large windfall. Ordinarily as hard to mount as she was to catch, the mare now stood still until Stewart finally managed to crawl on bareback. Then she started slowly down the trail, but after riding a mile Stewart fainted and slipped off her back. There Ben Stone found him, unconscious beside the trail.

Stone, the Negro cook for the expedition, had been kindling the noon fire when the Nez Percé attack came. He jumped over the fire and ran into the timber, taking refuge in the creek. He lay in the icy water, partly covered by brush, for several hours until he was sure the Indians were gone. Bothered by rheumatism, he was so still when he emerged that it took him a long time to stumble down the trail to where he found Stewart. He finally managed to get the injured man back onto his horse and they had barely gotten under way when Weikert and Wilkie overtook them.

The party was quickly reorganized with both Stone and Stewart riding and Weikert and Wilkie taking turns on the stopped for a lunch of raw ham and third horse.

At Mount Washburn they stopped for a lunch of raw ham and crackers, the only food they'd salvaged from the camp. Without rest they moved on as soon as the suffering Steward could be hoisted back into the saddle.

Their pace was exasperatingly slow but by traveling all night they managed to reach Mammoth Springs at six the next morning, having brought a seriously-wounded man 50 miles over mountains trails in just under 13 hours. There they learned that Pfister had arrived earlier with news of the attack but he knew no more than the others of the fate of the rest of the party. Fortunately, there was an English doctor there and he took charge of Stewart and sent a messenger out for an Army ambulance.

After a hurried breakfast Weikert tried to persuade Jim McCartney, owner of the Mammoth ranch, to join in a search for the missing members of the party. McCartney was reluctant to cross the trail of the Nez Percés if it could be avoided, but he finally promised to go the next morning if the other men did not show up by then.

Later on in the day Duncan stumbled in and reported that Deitrich was lying beside the trail a few miles back, completely exhausted. Weikert went out and brought him in. Eight of the party were now accounted for—seven at Mammoth and the dead man, Kenck, back at Tower Falls.

EARLY next morning Weikert and McCartney started back to search for the two men still missing. The English doctor and the others at the Springs decided to go on to Helena, leaving just Deitrich and the Negro, Ben Stone, to take care of Stewart until the Army ambulance arrived.

"This may be an unhealthy place for a while," Weikert warned them as he swung up into the saddle. "Until the Army gets here, keep a close watch—and hang onto your scalps."

"Sure will," Deitrich promised, and after a moment of silence he put a detaining hand on Weikert's bridle. "Andy, we're not out of the woods yet. If anything goes wrong back there in the Park, I'll see you get a decent burial. Will you do the same for me if I don't make it?"

Weikert promised, and after a quick handshake galloped off to join McCartney.

They camped that night in a little hidden cove and although they had seen no Indian sign they made cold camp. The next morning they reached Tower Falls, retrieved Kenck's body, and gave it a temporary shallow burial. Then they returned to the cove, planning to spend the night there. After supper as they were picketing the horses McCartney suddenly said, "Andy, those owl hoots we've been hearing—I'd stake my last dollar they're Indians. Something tells me we'd better get out of here."

They saddled and started back for Mammoth but the trail was already blocked by Indians and the two men began to circle. They rode until 3 A.M., crossed the Yellowstone River and again made cold camp.

Next morning they dropped into a valley where they found most of the horses that had been stampeded in the first attack at Tower Falls. Rounding them up, the two started driving them ahead. This was fortunate, for the loose remuda was pounced upon a small band of about eighteen Nez Percé stragglers. Abandoning the animals, Weikert and McCartney were finally able to outdistance the tired and inferior Indian ponies. There was considerable shooting on both sides, but firing from a running horse is a difficult feat and there were no casualties.

Then, frightened by the warwhoops and shooting. McCartney's horse began to pitch and, caught half-turned in the saddle, the rancher didn't have a chance to ride it. Seeing his partner thrown, Weikert swerved to head off the riderless horse. As his mount turned, a stray bullet caught it in the shoulder and for the second time Andy went sprawling when his horse piled up. But this time it was for keeps.

He was up immediately, crouching behind the dead animal and pouring a steady fire into the ranks of oncoming braves. Several ponies went down and the warriors drew off in temporary confusion, giving McCartney a chance to get into action again.

The two men began running along the hillside, one kneeling and firing while the other ran to some sheltering object farther on and in turn fired cover for the other. They were still some distance from the thicket they were heading for when Weikert's hammer clicked on an empty chamber. In another minute McCartney too had exhausted his ammunition. Fortunately, they had already taught the Indians enough respect for their marksmanship so they were able to make cover. Not realizing they now had the white men at their mercy, the Indians gave up the chase and straggled back to strip the saddle off the dead horse.

On the other side of the thicket Weikert and McCartney again almost ran head-on into a roving band of warriors. Keeping to cover, they set out afoot for the Springs. They crossed Gardiner River at dusk, wading neck-deep in the icy water. Darkness overtook them and they camped still a couple of miles short of Mammoth Springs.

Without ammunition as they were, this was fortunate for them. When they approached McCartney's cabin next morning they found the Nez Percés had been there before them. The window was broken and the door sagged on splintered hinges.

Inside they found the body of Deitrich, bloody and scalped, sprawled on the floor. There was no sign of Stewart or Ben Stone. The cabin had been ransacked and everything of value carried off.

Leaving McCartney to guard what remained, Weikert set out for the nearest ranch some seven miles away. His progress was slow for he had had only three hours of sleep in the past seven days and no food for thirty-six hours. About midnight he stumbled into an encampment of Bannack scouts where he found Ben Stone, who had been picked up by them only a few hours earlier.

Here too he had the first news of the two still-missing members of his party, Roberts and Faller. They had met a detachment of General Howard's command the second night after the attack at Tower Falls and were now on their way to Virginia City, 150 miles away.

From Ben Stone and the Bannack warriors he was able to piece together what had happened at McCartney's cabin. Instead of accompanying the ambulance when it came for Stewart, Deitrich and Stone decided to wait for Weikert's return, hoping he would have the missing men with him. That afternoon as Ben loitered on the steps and Deitrich had gone out to picket the horses, a group of horsemen appeared on the hill some distance away. At first Ben mistook them for Weikert's party, and he went indoors to stir up the fire and prepare a meal for them.

The riders were almost at the cabin door when Stone looked out again and realized they were Indians. He went out the back window fast and up the gulch into the timber where he sat all night in a tree while the pursuing braves beat the underbrush for him. At length they left and Stone started out afoot, finally stumbling into the camp of the Bannack scouts.

Apparently Deitrich too made good his escape that first evening but he must have returned next evening to the cabin to look for food and been surprised by another band of Nez Percé stragglers there. His body was still warm when the Bannacks, close on the heels of the disorganized warriors of Chief Joseph, reached the scene.

After a brief rest Weikert borrowed a team and wagon and set out to keep the promise so lightly made to Deitrich. Using the two horses, he packed out the bodies—that of Kenck for fifty miles—loaded them into the wagon, and set out on the longest and most lonesome journey of his life. As the wagon bumped and jolted over the 200 miles of almost impassable road back to Helena, Weikert must have wondered if it had been worth it to prove the pioneer's creed—that a man could go wherever he pleased, even into the middle of an Indian war.

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A fist exploded on Jenk's jaw, slamming him across the room

TRAIL OUT OF TOWN

The new bookkeeper, Dixon Quade, wasn't the kind to back water for any man

THE STAGE swung down the main street of Queen City and rattled to a stop in front of the Wells Fargo office. The driver jumped to the ground and called out to his lone passenger.

"We'll be here about ten minutes."

Dixon Quade nodded, pushed the coach door open, and climbed out. He moved his tall frame into the shade of the Wells Fargo building and looked around him. Queen City was a plains town pushed in two directions at once. The three saloons across the street and down the block were there for the cowhands who worked on the big ranches nearby. The church and general store at the other end of the street testified to the presence of serious-minded dirt farmers in the territory around the town.

Dixon hesitated, then strolled along the broadwalk toward the general store. Before he reached it, a sign tacked to the wall of a small wooden building caught his eye. It read:

Bookkeeper Needed. Apply Within.

Five bullet holes partly blotted out the word bookkeeper.

All his life, Dixon had made decisions quickly. He stepped to the door of the little office and went inside. Two big

By M. L. BATCHELDER

desks took nearly all the space in the little room. At one of the desks an old man sat writing. His hair was gray, the lines in his face were grooved deep.

"You need a bookkeeper?" asked Dixon.

"Are you a bookkeeper?" replied the old man, eyeing him cautiously.

"I used to be. In St. Louis. Reckon I still remember most of it."

The man at the desk threw down the pencil in his hand and leaned back in his swivel chair. "Did you see my sign outside?"

Dixon nodded. "That's why I'm here."

"Did you see what happened to it?"

Again Dixon nodded.

The old man looked at him with eyes narrowed. "The same thing could happen to you. Can you handle a gun?"

Dixon scratched his chin thoughtfully. "A gun's not the answer to everything. Could be there's a better way."

The old man spun around in the chair, facing away from Dixon. His voice was flat and unemotional. "I'll give you the whole thing right now. I'd just be wasting your time if I didn't. I've just finished building a grain elevator in Queen City. In a few days the first wagon loads of wheat will begin arriving here. I need someone to keep books, weigh in the wagons, and help me run the business."

Dixon said, "It sounds simple. What's the fuss?"

"I'm coming to that. Five years ago, this was cattle country. Now, south and west of here, the farmers are planting the ground in wheat. The ranches there have had to move out, had to move on up into Kansas. The other ranchers around here figure they're next—and they don't like it. And they don't like anyone or anything that encourages the farmers. They particularly don't like the idea of a grain elevator, because now the farmers can hold their wheat until they get a decent price instead of having to sell out at the end of harvest. In three or four years, farmers around here will get their heads above water and they'll be settled here for good. A poor crop price right now would drive most of them away."

The old man spun around in his chair and faced Dixon. "Do you get it? The ranchers don't like my grain elevator, and they won't like anyone who works for me. They show it in a lot of ways, all of them unpleasant."

Dixon stood looking down at the stern-faced little man for a moment and then said, "Dixon Quade is my name. I reckon I can just call you Boss."

A grin split the old man's face and he stuck out his hand. "Dan Murphy is the name, and you can just call me Dan."

DIXON went from the office to the Colony House where he rented a room and inquired the directions to the most reasonable cafe in town. At the cafe, he ordered steak and potatoes from the pretty girl who waited on him and sat back, waiting for the order to be filled. He was still waiting when three cowmen came into the cafe. They had evidently come from the Queen of the Prairies Saloon, from the smell and their noisy talk. They sat down at a table near Dixon and roared for steaks.

One of the cowhands leaned back and looked around him. He was a big man, and sure of himself. His eyes focused on Dixon and stayed there for almost half a minute.

Then he said, "Mister, how come I don't know your name? Somewhere I seen you, but where was it?" His tongue was thick. "Dodge? Down by the Pecos? Where was it?"

Dixon shook his head and smiled, "I've never been there."

The man shook his head. "Sure seems to me—you don't live around here, do you?"

"I just got a room at the Colony House. I figure on staying here from now on."

The cowman rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand and looked at the neat black clothing Dixon was wearing. "Are you a gambler? You going to deal at the Queen of the Prairies?"

"No," answered Dixon. "Dan Murphy hired me this morning to keep books for

the new grain elevator."

The words ended in a cold silence that had cut into the room. The waitress looked up in surprise, and then her eyes went to the three cowmen. The three sat still, letting the words sink in. Then the big man let out a bellow and lurched to his feet, knocking over his chair. He towered over Dan and it was no longer the liquor talking.

"You work for Murphy, do you? Why, you thin-faced son, you don't work for anybody. You just quit. You just decided to leave town. You don't even want to eat in our town. Get!"

Dixon's fingers curled in anger, and the muscles of his jaw tensed, but his voice, when it came, was mild. "I'd like to finish my steak. You don't mind if I eat, do you?"

The big man reached down and placed his hand on Dixon's shoulder. "You don't eat here or anywhere else in Queen City. You just get out, understand?"

Then the waitress's clear voice cut through the conversation, jerking the cowmen around, "That's enough, Jenks. You want steaks or this load of buckshot for dinner?"

Laid across the top of the counter was a double-barreled shotgun pointing straight at the big man's stomach. The girl's finger was crooked around the double trigger, and her angry eyes said she meant what she was saying.

"But, Mary," the big man protested, pulling his hand from Dixon's shoulder reluctantly. "You don't want no damn farmer's man eating in your place."

The girl flared, "I'll decide who I want to eat here, Floyd Jenks, and don't you forget it. Now, sit down and eat like decent folks or leave."

Jenks glared at the girl, then stomped to the door, followed by the two who were with him. The girl put the shotgun back underneath the counter, picked up Dixon's steak and potatoes, and brought it to his table. Dixon looked up at her and smiled.

"Thanks," he said.

The girl didn't return the smile. "I waited for you to make your play, but you never did. I finally had to take a hand before my place got messed up."

Dixon took the words in stride. "Who was he? He didn't seem very friendly."

The girls voice showed a touch of exasperation. "He's Floyd Jenks. He owns the Spade spread; the other two were Spade hands. They don't care much for Mr. Murphy."

Cutting into his steak, Dixon said, "You seem to know how to handle him."

The girl shrugged. "I'm a woman. What was he going to do, shoot it out with me? Now, if there'd been a man here—" She let the words trail off, waiting to see if they would get a reaction.

Dixon smiled at her again. "You cook a mighty fine steak, Miss."

The girl flushed angrily and walked away. Dixon finished his steak, paid the check and left. He felt a strange exultation. It had been a long time since he'd walked away from a fuss like that without having to hit the trail out of town with a posse on his neck.

THE next day, when he reported for work, Murphy sent him down to the tiny office in the grain elevator to set up his books and get ready for the first wagon load of wheat. The sun was high in the sky when a light tap sounded on the door. He opened it and found the waitress from the cafe, balancing a cloth-covered tray. She entered and set the tray on the desk. "Mr. Murphy ordered this for you. He doesn't want you to leave and take a chance of missing the first wagon load of wheat."

"Thank you, Miss—" He raised his eyebrows in a questioning look.

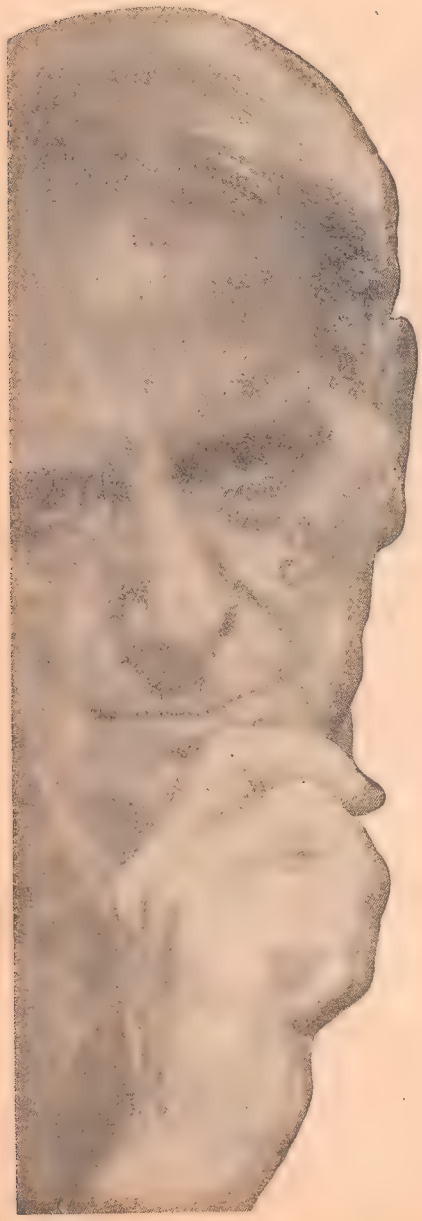
"My name is Mary Carter. I run the cafe." She hesitated a moment, then said, "I figured you would have sense enough to leave town. You know Jenks wasn't joking yesterday, don't you?"

"He didn't appear to be fooling around, Miss Carter."

"Well?"

Dixon stretched his arms. His fingers were cramped from the writing he had

To The Man With
HERNIA
Who Can Not Submit to Surgery



THE MAN condemned to live with rupture, all too often faces a grim future.

There is only one known cure . . . and that is surgical correction. Yet, for many, this relief must be denied or delayed for any one of a variety of reasons. It is to this group of unfortunate persons that this message is directed.

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been doing all morning, dredging up the almost forgotten tricks of bookkeeping, dealing with ledgers, making the right entries in the right columns.

"Well, what?"

Mary smoothed her white apron impatiently. "What are you, a child? This isn't a game you're taking a hand in. You can't just play along until things get unpleasant and then call time out. People know and like Dan Murphy. He's lived around here all his life. Jenks and his boys can't do anything to Mr. Murphy without getting the whole town riled up, but you're different. You're a stranger. Nobody gives a hang what happens to you."

Dixon shook his head solemnly. "Can't say as I agree with you, there. Only yesterday a girl here used a shotgun to get me out of a fracas."

The girl whirled around angrily and started out the door. She was met at the entrance of the little office by Floyd Jenks, who shoved his way past her, followed by the two Spade cowhands who had been with him in the cafe the day before.

Jenks laughed, his voice unpleasant. "I see Mary hasn't got a gun today, so you'll have to do your own gunfighting, Mr. Bookkeeper."

The girl turned and watched the four men from the door, her eyes troubled.

Dixon leaned back in his chair, his eyes moving from man to man. When they reached Jenks, the big rancher's brow furrowed and a puzzled look came into his face again.

"I asked you yesterday, bookkeeper, where have I seen you? San Antone? Maybe El Paso?"

The man at the desk answered warily, "I don't recall being in those places. Is there something I can do for you gentlemen?"

"Are you wearing a gun, bookkeeper?"

Dixon shook his head. "What would a bookkeeper do with a gun?"

"He could stand up on his hind legs and fight with it!" Jenks snapped. "Do you use that excuse very much?"

"I haven't had to," answered Dixon truthfully. "If you gentlemen haven't anything further to discuss with me, I'm expecting a customer soon and I have some work to do."

Jenks caught his breath and then reached down, grasped the front of Dixon's coat, and hauled him to his feet. "You got lots of work to do right here."

Without heat, Dixon reached up and pulled Jenks' hands loose from his coat. His words came quietly.

"That's the second time you've put your hands on my coat. Don't do it again."

The words jerked an oath from Jenks, and the big rancher grabbed again at Dixon. The instant his fingers closed on the cloth, a fist exploded alongside his jaw and slammed him clear across the little office and hard against the wall. The other two cowboys clawed their guns from their holsters and covered Dixon. Dixon ignored them, keeping his eyes on Jenks.

Jenks shook his head dazedly until he realized what had happened. Then, with a bellow of rage, he started across the room after Dixon. The man at the desk waited quietly, and just as the big cowman reached him, Dixon braced himself against the desk, raised one foot, and kicked Jenks in the stomach. The man went down on the floor and doubled up. The room was silent except for the man on the floor.

One of the two cowhands came to with a start and cursed. He raised his gun and pointed it at Dixon's middle. Dixon stood still, but his words cut through the man's rage.

"I haven't got a gun. If you shoot me you'll be strung up for murder."

The cowhand's finger eased on the trigger, but his voice was still shaking with anger. "Then put on a gun and let's have it out."

"Nothing doing. I'm not putting on a gun for you. And you can't shoot me without one, because Mary Carter will tell the court you gunned down a weaponless man and you'll hang."

The other cowboy rasped, "Okay,

stranger, you don't get shot. But we're going to beat you till you can't walk for what you just did to Floyd."

Dixon settled back and eyed the pair of angry cowhands. "Just how do you figure on doing it? The first one who touches me gets laid out alongside your friend on the floor. You can't shoot a man without a gun—unless you want to hang. Now, if you'd care to both try to tackle me without the guns, I'd be happy to accommodate you."

The two faced him, their rage fighting with reason. Finally one said, "Let's get Floyd out of here and take him down to the dock. We'll let Floyd settle it himself."

DIXON watched them help Jenks to his feet and drag him to his horse. The three rode away, Jenks doubled over the saddle horn. Dixon turned to the white-faced girl, who had stood just inside the doorway.

"Thank you again, Mary. Since you've saved my life twice I figure I can call you Mary instead of Miss Carter."

The girl bit her lip uncertainly. "You—you weren't afraid of those three. You stood there without a gun and you weren't afraid. They could have killed you."

Dixon shook his head. "No, they couldn't. Not while you were there. You were more protection than a gun. If I'd had a gun, someone would have been shot."

The girl's voice went angry again, but this time there was a look of puzzlement in her eyes. "You won't always have a woman to hide behind. Someday you've got to fight your own fights. If the cowhands ever catch you alone, not having a gun won't help."

The man's eyes were suddenly rock-hard as he picked up a pencil from the desk and studied it, "You seem to have gotten the wrong idea somewhere," he said softly. "I never said I won't use a gun. I just don't want to unless I have to."

The sound of a team of horses creaking leather and the rattle of a wagon followed the words. Dixon looked up at the girl and grinned.

[Turn Page]

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"My first customer," he said.

A week later, a few wagons were still coming in from the farms around Queen City. Dixon was kept busy at the elevator, while Dan Murphy rode to every farm in the district, picking up business. Once he rode out to the grain elevator and told Dixon, "We got a big one. I've been twenty miles west of here, out by Skeleton Creek, and argued half a dozen of the farmers out there into putting together a wheat wagon train and bringing their harvest here in a bunch. If that bunch makes it we'll get customers from all over this part of the territory."

The day the wagon train was to arrive, Dixon hurried through his morning work so as to be ready to take special care of the group. Mary found herself, as she had every day, leaving the cafe under the care of the cook at noon and bringing Dixon's dinner to him at the elevator. As she came into the little office, Dixon's eyes lighted up and he smiled.

"Come in, Mary. I'm glad to see you."

"You mean you're glad to see the food," Mary laughed, and set the tray on the desk. "How are things going?"

"Fine," said Dixon cheerfully. "They've been coming in pretty regularly around here, but this bunch coming in this afternoon really tells the story. If they make it in, we'll get farmers from thirty or forty miles away. That wheat wagon train idea of Dan's was a wonder."

"Heard anything more from the Spade outfit?"

Dixon frowned. "No, I can't understand it, either. I figured sure they'd be up to something by this time. They're not the kind to be scared off by a kick in the stomach."

The sound of a horse pounding up to the elevator brought Dixon to his feet. He ran outside to see Dan Murphy ride up. The old man's face was tired.

"Dix, it looks like we hit a stone wall. The farmers are camped out the other side of the Boomer Creek and won't come any further. Half a dozen Spade hands rode down on them and told them that if they crossed the creek they'd get their wheat dumped into the water."

Dixon said angrily, "Damn it, Dan, we've got a sheriff. Won't he ride out there and protect them if they cross the creek?"

Murphy nodded his head, "Sure, Dix. But this trip was to show everyone that the farmers could come to Queen City and use the elevator. The sheriff can't ride shotgun for every wagon train that comes in here and the farmers know it. We could get this one in with his help, but it'd be the last one to try."

Dixon chewed his lip angrily. "There's got to be a way, Dan. Can't you argue with the farmers? They can't let the Spade bunch rawhide 'em into quitting."

Murphy shook his head. "They won't do it, Dix. They won't risk their crops like that. If that wheat goes into Boomer Creek, most of those farmers will have to fold up. This was their big year, son. They can't afford to take a chance."

Dixon ground his fist into his open hand as his mind probed the problem.

Finally, he said, "Dan there's one way." The old man looked at him.

Dixon continued. "You can ride back there and promise those farmers that we'll stand good for their wheat. If they get it here, all right. If they get it dumped into the creek, the grain elevator will pay market price for it."

Murphy grunted, "That's crazy. It'll ruin us if that Spade bunch means what they say. And they mean it, too."

Dixon shrugged, "It'll ruin us anyway, Dan, if that wagon train doesn't come through after we argued them into making the trip. Look, it's your elevator, and it's your money. I can't ask you to risk it if you don't want to. But if you decide to go ahead, I'll do everything I can to see that the wagon train comes through all right."

Murphy looked at the younger man, his eyes trying again to fit Dixon into a mold. Finally he said, "Like you say, we're ruined if we don't. Let's try it. If it doesn't work, we're washed up. If it does, I've got myself a new partner."

Dixon turned and walked back into the office. He took a key from a drawer

in the desk, came back outside, and locked the door. "You head back to the wagon train and make your proposition. Dan. If they agree, start across the creek. I'll be out there as soon as I go to my room at the Colony House."

Murphy mounted and rode west away from the grain elevator. Dixon started walking towards the Colony House. Mary walked beside him. The two moved through the quiet afternoon without speaking.

When they reached the Colony House, Mary said, "What are you going to do, Dix? Your tricks won't help you now."

Dixon looked down at her. "You're wrong, Mary. I've got one more trick, and I've got one more person to help me. If things work out; I think maybe Floyd Jenks will help me stop the cowmen rawhiding the farmers around here."

He turned and went into the Colony House.

DAN MURPHY watched apprehensively as the last of the eight wagons of wheat crossed the ford in Boomer Creek and moved to join the others on the eastern bank. None of the Spade hands had shown up yet, but Murphy had the feeling they were not far off. Just then the brush at the far side of the road parted and Floyd Jenks spurred his mount through and onto the road in front of the wagons. The big man was followed by four others.

Jenks spoke, his raspy voice directed to Murphy, "You played a dirty trick on these sod-busters, Dan. You talked 'em into coming across the creek, and now their wheat is going to get all wet. I warned you."

He pulled the revolver from its holster at his side and held it on Murphy. Over his shoulder he said to the Spade men, "You boys mosey over to that first wagon there and see if you can find a deep enough spot in the creek to dump it."

The men dismounted wordlessly and walked to the wagon. One of them kicked a rock from behind a wheel, and another

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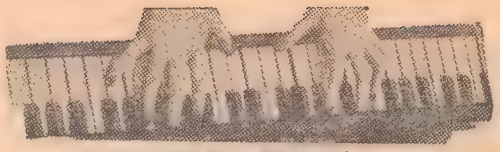

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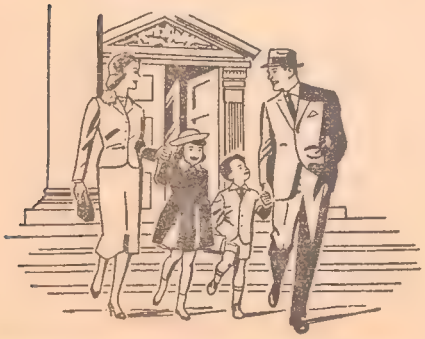


WORSHIP TOGETHER EVERY WEEK!

started to do the same on the other side when a voice floated down from above and about 20 feet to the east.

"If you were to kick that other rock loose, I imagine I'd have to shoot you in the belly."

There, on a rock towering over the scene, stood Dixon Quade, a revolver in each hand.

The two weapons seemed to hypnotize the group frozen below. Jenks, his back to Dixon, slowly returned his gun to its holster, then reined his horse around to face the man on the rock. The big rancher's face was twisted in a grin.

"So the bookkeeper finally put on his guns. Well, mister, that's where you made your mistake. You've just changed the only thing that kept me from gunning you. Now we can meet man to man and we'll see who stays and who leaves. Holster your gun and make your play."

As Dixon stood looking down at the man below him, he felt the old pattern begin. He'd heard those words—or others just like them—too many times. The words, and then the frantic sweep of hands. The crack of a shot, maybe two, and then the trail out of town again. It was like a stage play where he did the same thing over and over again.

And he threw back his head and laughed.

The man on the horse gaped at him. There was something about Dixon, Jenks thought. Where had it been? Wichita? Coffeyville? Then he flushed. The black-clad stranger was making a fool of him.

"What's the matter? Put up your guns. I can't draw with you like this. You got the drop on me," Jenks growled.

Dixon laughed again, "Sure, I got the drop on you. Why should I give you an edge? Give me one good reason why I should try to outdraw you when I already have the drop. You're a fool, Jenks."

The curse came to Jenks's mouth and spilled out. Without warning, one of the guns in Dixon's hand bucked and roared. The horn on Jenks's saddle snapped off. The gun barked again and Jenks's hat went sailing through the air. Again the gun jumped in Dixon's hand and the

wooden butt of the rifle in Jenks's saddle boot splintered.

The words came down from the rock, "Think it, but don't say it, Jenks."

The words came down again, "There'll be other farmers coming this way with their wheat, Jenks. I expect you to keep your cowhands away from them. I expect you to talk to the other cow outfits and see that they do the same thing. You'll do that for me, won't you, Jenks?"

As the voice washed over him, Jenks remembered. The man on the rock spoke again. "You said you remember seeing me somewhere, Jenks. Ever been down Abilene way?"

The words were low, barely reaching the other man. And Jenks remembered the saloon in Abilene where two men spoke sharply to the tall, black-clad man at the end of the bar, and then had never spoken again.

"You're—"

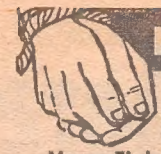
Jenks never finished. The words were cut off as the voice came down one last time from the man on the rock, "My name is Quade, Jenks. Remember that. Dixon Quade. If you forget it, I'll come visiting to ask you why. Now, you turn your horse around and ride on back to the Spade with your boys."

He stood there a moment until Jenks jerked his mount around and started across the creek. Then he holstered the two guns, went down the far side of the rock to where he had tied his horse, and mounted. He rode around to join the wagons as the last of the Spade cowhands splashed his mount up the far side of the creek bed.

He nodded to Dan and said, "Let's go."

Murphy swung his horse alongside Dixon's, and the wheat wagons fell in behind. "I'm not sure just what went on there, but it looks like I've got myself a partner," Murphy said.

Dixon grinned, unbuckled the holster from around his waist, and hung it on his saddle horn. As the sun slanted in past the cotton woods alongside the road, Dixon remarked, "Wonder how a man could ever get used to wearing those things?"



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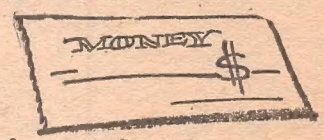

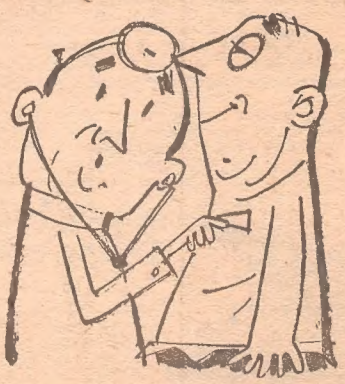

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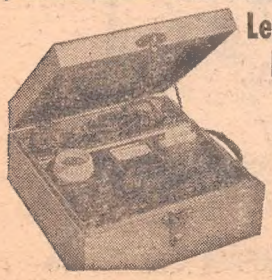

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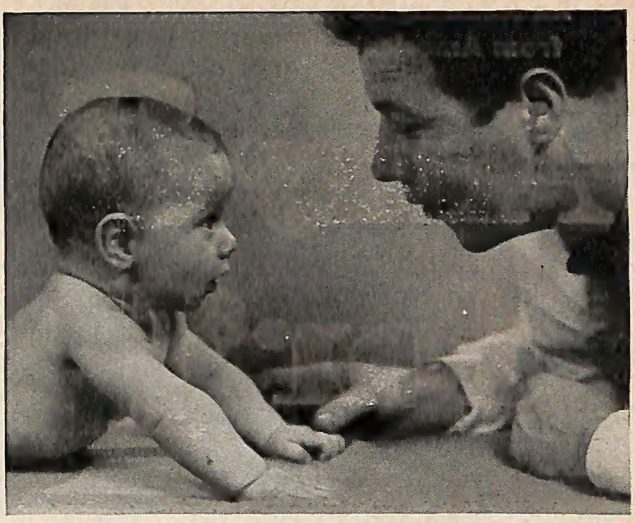

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